DECEMBER
35 CENTS

Alfred HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

Alfred HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1956



I have for some time, since the success of my television show "Alfred Hitchcock Presents . . .", twiddled with the thought of doing a fast-paced, modern suspense magazine containing all new stories—stories that I like and feel the public will like. But, the twiddling went on—and on; I never quite "got to it."

Then one evening I was sitting at home minding my own business . . . when the telephone rang. The caller inquired if I might be interested in sponsoring a magazine to be entitled ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE.

Well now, suspense is my business and I replied that I might be interested—the culmination of such a project contingent upon the experience of the publishers in the mystery-fiction field. As we talked I learned that the call emanated from the office of the publishers of MANHUNT, America's best selling crime-fiction magazine. We got together and . . .

Here it is . . . ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, to entertain, titillate and surprise you. We hope you have a shuddering good time!

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

Cover photograph by Gerald Adams

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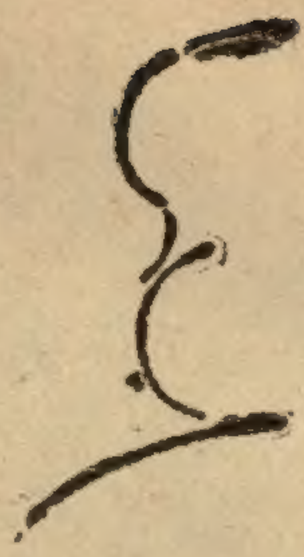
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I wish to make it clear at once that I agree completely that the amusement park is a place to have fun. With this bit of illuminating brilliance recorded, I hasten to add that none of the three people you are about to meet at this amusement park is destined to have much fun. As a matter of fact, one of them is slated for personal acquaintanceship with rigor mortis.



here lies . . .

by C. L. Moore

HE SAW a pink-striped arm with a pointing hand shoot past his face. A woman's breathless voice said, "Oh, look at that girl! What's she going to *do?*"

There wasn't any doubt what the girl was going to do. The amusement pier had a fence all around it, to stand between the deep blue sea and the people with devils after them, people who wanted to do what this girl was trying. She had hung her big straw hat, with the straw horse and rider on the side of it, over a fence post. Over that she'd hung her big, dirty embroidered handbag. Now she had one toe stuck through the wire mesh and she was trying to get her other knee over the top of the fence. She wore no stockings and her legs were pale and very thin.

Cliff heard himself say foolishly, "That girl's going to get hurt." He made it to the fence in three jumps. He stuck his own toe in the mesh and got up high enough to take her by the elbow.

"Lady," he said, "you want to fall off the pier? Come on down."

She looked at him over her shoulder, the darkness blurring her face so that he could only guess she was young. Not much older than me, he thought, and pulled downward on the bony elbow. "Lady—"

"I'm not a lady," she told him in a fierce whisper. "Let go, will you? Let go!"

"You don't want to do this," he said, trying to throw persuasion into his voice. "There's a lot of cold water down there. Look." A wave crashed over and hissed up the beach below them in the dark.

"People are watching. Come on down."

"Who wants to live?" she demanded, tugging.

Cliff looked down at the beach and suddenly found himself laughing a little. "You do," he said. She swiveled her head around again and stared, her eyes and mouth dark splotches in the shadowy face.

Cliff laughed again. He let go the elbow. "Okay, go ahead. Jump."

She hung there, looking down at him and breathing noisily through her open mouth.

Cliff said, "Go on, what's keeping you? I just looked down. Did you? It's only about five feet to the sand, and the tide's out. You couldn't even sprain an ankle."



She teetered a moment on the swaying wire and then crooked up one arm and hid her face against it. Cliff said pityingly, "Come on down."

"Help me," she said.

She was like a bundle of dry twigs under the summer dress she wore. He had never seen a girl so thin. The little knot of loiterers who had slowed to watch moved on again, losing interest. Even the pink-striped woman had disappeared. The show was over and nobody had been much interested, anyhow.

Cliff said, "That's better. You didn't really want to drown yourself. Come along and I'll buy you some popcorn."

"I hate popcorn," the girl said. "I need a drink."

Cliff pushed a hand in his pocket and turned the coins over with his fingertips. "I could buy you a beer."

They sat with their elbows on the moist bar and their heels hooked over the stool rungs, feeling through bar and stool the deep

drag and suck and crash of the dark Pacific under the floor. Outside all the noises of the midway on Saturday night went round and round.

"Now what was all this about?" Cliff folded his arms on the bar as he had often seen his father do. He felt quite adult. "You weren't really serious. I could tell that. What were you up to?"

"I *was* serious." She drank thirstily and then looked at him out of the tops of her eyes. They were large and dark, and even in this dimness he could see how bloodshot they were. She had a scratch along her jaw, and her face was both puffed and thin. She wasn't as young as he'd thought. Not nearly as young. Her name was Anne.

"I just thought I'd rather die than live, that's all," she said. "I feel like somebody who died of old age a long time ago. Everything that was important to me died. I ought to carry a little tombstone around with me that says HERE LIES—" She paused and gave him that look from the tops of her eyes again. "Do you know who I am?" she asked.

"You're too nice a girl to talk that way." Cliff felt flattered at the confidences, but not at all sure just what was expected of him. He played it safe.

She gazed in silence at him. Then she dug into the big dirty handbag and brought out a pint bottle. She turned her head so the hatbrim hid her, and he heard the bottle gurgle. "I'm not so nice," she said, wiping her mouth. "The only thing is, it takes courage to kill yourself. I'll have to work up to it. But I will. It's the only way I can get back at him."

"Back at who?" Cliff asked. He felt awkward, but he wanted her to go on talking. Partly because it was exciting to hear about, partly because he had in a way, he supposed, saved her life, and that gave him a responsible feeling toward her. Get her talking, he thought, and maybe the whole thing will pass over. He said, "There's as good fish in the sea, you know. Why worry? You're young and pretty—" He heard his voice falter a little on that, but he went on heartily. "—young and pretty, and you ought to take better care of yourself."

"Am I?" She touched the scratch on her cheek. "Really?"

He was glad the mirror was dim. "Sure you are."

She thought it over briefly and then tipped the pint bottle to her mouth again. Coughing, she said, "I'd offer you some, but there's hardly any left, and anyway, you're a little young for boilermakers."

"I'm not that young," Cliff said. "I don't mix my drinks, anyhow. You know what they say, 'Whiskey, beer—never fear. Beer, whiskey—mighty risky.' You'll be sick as a

dog tomorrow if you don't stop."

"Who cares?" She dropped the bottle in the bag and took another long, thirsty pull at the beer. Under a white moustache of foam, she said with enormous self-pity, "I'm sick enough now. I feel terrible. If you hadn't butted in, I'd be dead and out of it. Don't you understand? I've got to get even somehow. When I heard he'd got into town yesterday, I figured my chance had really come. I've tried to get even before, but it never quite works, somehow. It never quite works." She wiped off the foam with an unsteady finger.

"What'd you try?" Cliff asked. She didn't seem to need much encouragement to talk, he realized. Still, it ought to make her feel better.

"The reason I came down here is there's a joint marked Off Limits," she said rapidly. "Cops were hanging around, and a lot of service men. I thought if I made enough trouble, there'd be a raid. Well, I made trouble." She touched the scratch again. "There was a raid, all right, and I gave my right name and everything, good and loud. But—" She sighed and her thin shoulders collapsed a little. "They won't pick me up any more. They told me to go home and sleep it off. They're sorry for me. I get just so far and then it doesn't work. It's like having a guardian angel who hates me." She folded her matchstick arms. "You're sorry for me too, damn you. If you're so sorry why don't you help me get what I want?"

Cliff said uneasily, "What's that?"

She said, "Do you know who I am?" It wasn't so much that she hadn't heard him, he thought, as that she didn't want to answer.

"Look," he said, "why don't we drink up and take a walk on the pier. I want to see the sights. Come on."

"I'm a sight," she said bitterly. "Look at me. Take a good long look. I'm a mess, right? I've been a mess for two years. And you know who I am? I'm Mrs. William Howard Brewster, that's who. How do you like that?"

Cliff said, "Brewster?" uncertainly. He thought he had heard the name before, but it didn't mean anything to him now. He wondered if it should.

"That's what I said. The rally's tomorrow night. That's why he's in town. Here, I'll show you." She set her glass down with a bang. "I'll have another," she said loudly. "Bartender, one more beer for Mrs. William Howard Brewster. Me." Heads turned briefly to look at her.

"Take it easy," Cliff said. "My money's about gone."

She didn't hear him. She was fumbling in the big handbag.

"I want to ask you a question," she said, her voice insistent. "Look. Just look at this." With unsteady

fingers, she spread a newspaper clipping on the bar. A drop of water seeped through it from below and grayed the face of a large square-jawed young man who was looking up at them out of the clipping. In big capitals William Howard Brewster promised the State how much good he could accomplish for it if elected to the State Senate next week. So that's where I noticed the name, Cliff thought.

Anne looked earnestly at him, tapping the paper. "You think he looks like God? He thinks he does. He thinks he *is* God."

"Does he know where you are now?" Cliff asked with some relief. He was beginning to feel he didn't know how to handle this situation exactly, but it might be all right to call the man up and tell him where his wife was. Somebody ought to be looking after her, he thought.

"He doesn't know I'm alive," she said wearily. "I wish I weren't."

"You don't want to talk like that," Cliff said. He stood up, pushing back the stool. "Look, Anne, I think we ought to get moving. Now why don't you—"

She turned quickly, full of sudden animation, blinking her eyes fast. "But you didn't answer my question. Just let me tell you what happened and see what you think. It won't take but a minute. I really want your opinion. Would you ever know to look at this man he's just a cheap crook? Well, that's what he is. He certainly cheated me. I worked like a dog for three years for William Howard Brewster. Like a dog. I put him through law school. I paid the bills while he studied. That was my investment in the future. We were partners. Oh, sure." She picked up her fresh glass and blew gently into the foam, making a little slanting tunnel in it down to the beer. "He even made Phi Beta Kappa," she said in a marveling voice. "Oh, he's smart. He used to say I ought to wear the key. I was the one who paid for it."

"Well, now he's in the money, isn't he?" Cliff said. "What's wrong with that?"

She laughed. "Not a thing," she said, looking at him from the corners of her eyes this time, a sly look. She had such an odd way, he thought, of using the edges of her eyes for looking at him. "Only I never saw a penny of it. And I went along with everything he wanted, too. What else could I do? How could I stop him?" She put out a cold hand and seized his wrist with fingers hard and thin like bone. "Tell me," she said, "what else I could have done?"

"Maybe you shouldn't keep thinking about these things," he said uncomfortably, wondering if it would hurt her feelings for him to pull his wrist away.

"Tell me!" she insisted. "I tried everything I knew. I even quit kicking when he brought other

women home from bars. Can you imagine that? And I wasn't even drinking a lot. Not then. Not nearly as much as he said I was. I am *not,*" and she fixed him with the large, bloodshot stare, "—*not* an alcoholic, no matter what anyone says. I know perfectly well what I'm doing. It's just that I feel so—" She let her voice die, not finishing. After a moment she said, "Listen to the ocean down there. I wonder if the water's cold this time of year."

Cliff said hastily, "You don't want to think about that." He was trying to figure how to end this and get away. "You're just mad at your husband," he continued lightly. "You never really meant to jump off the pier. If you'd been serious, you'd have gone down to the other end where the deep water is."

She slapped the bar so loudly the bartender jumped and then looked at her. "I haven't got a husband," she said. "We aren't married any more. He knew how to ditch me when he was ready for the next step up." She made a harsh sound that resembled laughter. "That's funny, isn't it? Me putting him through law school so he'd learn how to frame me and get a divorce? Very funny. I'm laughing. I could die laughing."

Cliff thought, She's had too much to drink. She shouldn't have any more. At least, this is the last beer I'll pay for. He drained his own glass, telling himself profoundly that life can certainly be pretty tough for some people. Some people seem to get all the wrong breaks. He said, "That—that's too bad, Anne. You sure had tough luck all down the line. Look, Anne, I think I'd better be shoving off now."

She turned swiftly, her thin fingers pinching his sleeve, her eyes meeting his for the first time fully and in focus. "But you haven't told me," she said. Her gaze was anxious and searching. "What do you think I ought to do?"

He considered this, wondering what was the right thing to say. "I think you ought to pull yourself together, for one thing. There's nothing wrong with you. You're still young and—I mean, you made money when he needed it, didn't you? What's wrong with making it for yourself? You aren't the first girl who ever got a divorce. You could—"

Her eyes left his. She turned toward her glass again, shaking her head. "Not for myself. I'm too tired. I can't do anything by myself. I couldn't even jump off the pier." She tilted the empty glass. "You know something?" She cast him one swift, sly glance from the far corners of her eyes. "I've often thought it would be nice if he killed me and got hanged for it. He has a fine motive. I've done everything I could to make a scandal and ruin him. It's not my fault

I couldn't. I really tried, too."

"Cut it out," Cliff said.

She sighed and shrugged. "Oh well. I'll think of something." She shut her eyes briefly and sagged over the bar, sighing again with a deep, breathy sound from the bottom of her narrow lungs. Then she looked up and flashed a bright, determined smile. "Maybe we ought to talk about you now. Let's drink up." She thumped her glass on the bar. "Another beer for Mrs. William Howard Brewster."

Cliff got quickly to his feet. "Not for me. I'm on my way. Well, good-bye, Anne, I sure hope you—"

"Wait a minute. Hold on. What's your hurry? I'm ready, too, I guess. Maybe I've had enough." She settled the big straw hat on her head, snatched up her handbag. She was only a little unsteady, he thought, and as tall as he on her thin high heels, but no wider than a twig.

She smiled and blinked her eyes brightly at him, suddenly quite jaunty. "I feel better now," she assured him. "I feel fine. Why don't you walk me part way home? It's a beautiful night. I was noticing the moon over the water when I —just before I—" She paused, looking down at her handbag. "Well, anyhow, I'll be all right. Don't you worry about me. I've got the wherewithal." She laughed, patting the bag. "He had a professor who used to talk all the time about the wherewithal. It was one of our jokes, back in the good days. We did have good days, once." Her laughter went a little forced and then died.

"I have a bus to catch," Cliff said.

"Walk as far as my car and I'll give you a lift. I owe you that much. You did me a good turn. Oh, come along." She tucked her chin down and looked at him from the tops of her eyes with a sort of bloodshot coquettishness. "I might jump in the ocean if you don't."

Cliff thought, Well, maybe she might, at that. Maybe I ought to go with her. I guess she hates being alone. It can't do any harm to walk aways with her. And he was yet young enough to find it hard to say no. He looked at the straw horse and rider cantering gaily along the brim of the straw hat. The bright summer dress looked quite cheerful. She smiled and her lipstick was not on very straight, but it was bright and red.

"All right," he said.

Of all the sounds, the music of the merry-go-round went with them farthest along the dark highway. At first there were filling stations and used car lots to break up the night, but before long, stretches of vacant lots began and it was like walking through open country between the street lights. Wild mustard grew high here, pale in the moonlight. Where the highway bordered the ocean, they could see the big luminous breakers come threshing in to collapse exhausted on the sand.

"How far is your car?" Cliff asked, beginning to feel uneasy.

In a remote voice she said, "Only a little way more." She pushed her hand through his arm and he could feel the handbag and the pint bottle flop heavily against his side with every step. Presently, still in the faraway voice, she began to speak.

"I thought about killing him, you know. Do you think that's terrible? I often thought about it. After all, I invested my life in him. And now it's paying off, but not to me. Louise is getting the payoff. I told you about Louise, didn't I?"

"No, you didn't. Look, Anne, don't you think—"

"He married Louise." She spoke quickly, not letting him finish. "He thought Louise was what he wanted—then. Terribly, terribly efficient, for one thing. He used to be mad because I wasn't efficient. Well, I guess I'm sorry for Louise, at that. I know what's ahead. He'll throw her over when he's ready for the next stepping stone. Don't think he won't. He has to be God. He has to have the last word. Louise will find out the same way I did."

"Now hold on," Cliff broke in. "Why not just forget about all this?" He looked down at her, but she was not paying much attention to him. She seemed to be looking all around the grassy verge they walked on, as if she had some particular spot in mind and meant to find it. Cars hissed by, each with its flash of light and sough of sound.

"Maybe you made mistakes too," Cliff said. Their isolation in the dark—with the cars going by and the ocean on the other side closing them in—created a sort of closeness that made him feel at once responsible and wise enough to help.

"It isn't too late to start over," he assured her. "You're young and pretty. You know you didn't really mean anything about getting even and jumping in the ocean and all that stuff. Why don't you just face up to—"

"Oh, shut up!" she cried out suddenly. "Shut your mouth!" She jerked her hand from his arm and swung to face him, the heavy handbag flailing from her wrist. "You know so much! You had to butt in. You had to stop me when I might have made it. You—"

"Not from that end of the pier," he said, shocked but stubborn. "If you'd really wanted to drown yourself you'd have—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" she screamed at him. "You had to stop me! Now you've got to help me get it done, do you hear?" She scrabbled in the handbag. "I told you I had the wherewithal. I've got it, all right. But I can't use it. I can't, I can't! I've tried. You do it for me!"

And she thrust the wherewithal into his hand. It wasn't very big—a

thirty-eight, maybe, he thought, with a short barrel. Warm from the depth of the bag and the company of the bottle.

The disbelieving part of his mind stood back and knew that nothing like this could possibly be happening to him.The rest of him was jolted to incoherence. He could only open his hand flat and shove the gun back into hers, stammering, "No, no, no!"

"I'm young and pretty!" she was saying, her hard fingers clenched around his, trying to fold his hand shut on the gun. "Here, take it! I know what I am. I know how I look. Take it, you little damned fool, and do what you stopped me from doing! I can't do it alone. I need help. Help me! Please!"

A wave of the most intense feeling washed over him, pity, terror, disbelief all hopelessly canceling each other out. Things like this can't happen, he thought, not in real life, not to me. And he remembered with horrified revulsion that he had sat beside her, talked to her, walked with her, actually felt the gun bump against his side, and had not even begun to guess what he was getting into. The cars went by a million miles away, each snatching with it a small, temporary haven of light and safety and leaving him here in the dark, struggling with the woman and the gun.

He said, "No, no, let me go, Anne! Don't! Anne!" But her fingers were hard as bone and in the desperate, incoherent struggle neither of them quite knew which held the gun.

He thought, Surely somebody will see this. Surely somebody will stop and help me. This can't be happening—not like this. Not to me!

But he felt the gun hard in his palm, and her finger somehow pressed between the trigger-guard and his, very cold, very strong. No matter how hard he fought to let it go, when the pressure tightened on his finger, somehow, somehow the end of the struggle came and she got what she wanted.

There had been a terrible jolt and flash between them, and he was not sure at first which of them it had struck. Though the noise was loud he felt an immense silence and wondered if it were he who was hit. Because guns kill, he told himself wonderingly. Real guns kill.

Then he felt her fold softly up against him and slide down. It was strange how soft she was, when she had been nothing but hard, twig-like bone before. Her hat fell off and rolled in half a circle, the pale straw horse and rider cantering in the moonlight.

He stood there shaking convulsively, the gun in his hand shaking too. Everything wavered. He had the strange feeling that until a moment ago there had been three of them: Anne, himself, and

a transparent, square-jawed William Howard Brewster walking between them. It was that transparent man she was really struggling to kill. And maybe she had, he thought dazedly. Anyway, now he was alone. He looked up at the stars and knew how terribly alone he was, feeling it for the first time. How alone every man is.

The car slid to a stop beside him while he still stood there looking up. He felt the gun in his hand and thought. It could have hit me, not her. I could be dead. It was inconceivable, but it was true. He could begin to believe it, as he could not have done ten minutes ago.

A car door slammed. He turned. A woman in a pink-striped dress was walking toward him through the wild mustard. He had a moment's startled feeling that she was Anne. Tall, thin, with big dark eyes, but these eyes met his squarely. They glanced once at the gun.

Cliff opened his hand wide and flat and heard the gun thump to the ground beside the bright summer dress at his feet. Without knowing that he was going to speak at all without even thinking what he would say, he heard his own voice with hysteria in it.

"She did it herself! You've got to believe me! She did it herself. She pushed the gun in my hand and made me pull the trigger."

The woman's dark eyes searched his face. She looked down once into the grass and then away again. "Be still," she said. "Let me think." She put her hands over her face and again he thought of Anne. But when she looked up again, she was resolute and not like Anne at all.

"All right," she said. "It's done. Nothing can help that now. But nobody will believe you. You know that."

"But it's true! She—"

"I saw you on the pier together," the woman broke in. "The bartender must have seen you leave together. Do you think the police will listen to you after that?"

He gulped and held his breath, desperately afraid he was going to cry. "I didn't," he said, hearing in his own voice a hint of the helplessness he had seen in Anne. "I didn't do it!"

She stood there for a long moment in silence, looking down again at the thin, motionless girl lying among the wild mustard, the highway dust blowing over her in the headlights. Then she seemed to pull herself together with a little shudder, and she stepped quickly to the car and reached in to switch off the lights. In the sudden dark she said, "All right. I knew her. I believe you. I believe it happened just as you say. Now listen. I'll help you, but you'll have to do exactly as I tell you. First of all, we'll put her in the back of my car. Wait, I'll spread out the tarp."

She turned swiftly, saying over her shoulder, "Go on, hurry before another car comes."

But Cliff felt a fragment of caution stirring in the midst of his relief and his terror. "Maybe we ought to call a doctor," he stammered. "Maybe—"

"Have you looked?" the woman said harshly, opening the back of the car. "She's dead."

"But the police—"

"Call the police and you're done for." She paused and looked at him in the dim starlight. "Now do you want out of this or don't you? Make up your mind fast."

"I—I'll do what you say."

"All right, then. Here, I'll help. You take her shoulders."

Her arms were like dry twigs again and she weighed nothing at all. Tall as she had been, she doubled up easily—with her feet against the spare tire, in the dark cavern of the car. The woman hesitated a moment before she closed the big curved lid. She stooped and put a strand of the straggling black hair aside quite gently from the good side of the shattered face. Half of it still looked very much like her own.

"Get in front," she said in a controlled voice. "We have a long drive ahead."

He didn't say a word for a long while. He was nothing inside, he thought. Nothing but a quivering and shaking mass. With a part of his mind, he was walking along the dark highway with Anne beside him and all this a nightmare that hadn't ever happened. If he could only go back, he thought with passion. If he could only go back, say half an hour, and leave her as his instinct had warned him, when they came out of the bar. He remembered how the gun had thumped against his side, never imagining then that it was a gun, and he thought he would never, never be fool enough again to let another human being get that close to him. He sat as far from the woman at the wheel as the seat allowed him. If it weren't for the shaking inside, he would have jumped from the car at the first stoplight and run until he dropped. But all he could do now was shut himself off, shut out the world.

It was late and they made good time. When they hit the freeway, the woman let the car really go, and the rest of the traffic became explosive, shining blurs that shot backward past the windows.

As they drove through silent Pasadena, he said, "Are you—" He licked dry lips and tried again, needing to know. "Were you her sister?"

She laughed like a little cough, quick and startled. "Under the skin, maybe."

"I thought— You look alike, and I thought—"

"We weren't related," she told

him in a flat, unemotional voice.

He was silent awhile, and the car left the outskirts of the city and began to climb. A sign flashed past. "Angeles Crest Highway."

"I saw you on the pier," he said. "It was you, wasn't it? You pointed her out when she was about to jump. Why?"

"I've been watching her. Ever since I got to town."

"Why? Why were you watching her?"

"Call it morbid curiosity if you like. I knew the state she was in. I knew what she might try to do. But I never really expected—this." She drew her shoulders together and was silent.

They went up steeply a long way. They passed the crest and began to drop. The hot breath of the desert blew in their faces. "We'll be there soon," she said.

They left the highway at last, and drove awhile with the lights switched off and only the pale starlight and the glow of paler sand to guide them. Somewhere far off the road they drew up at last, among Joshua trees that sighed noisily when the sound of the motor stopped. The stars were a blaze that filled the whole sky, infinitely many, powderings beyond powderings of pale silver that crowded the spaces behind the bright, familiar stars.

"Get out," the woman said. "Now we dig."

He thought of balking.

"Come on, get it over," she said impatiently. "We're on the same side. I'm covering up for you. But you've got to help. We're very lucky there's a shovel in the car. We'll take turns."

"But why?" he demanded. "I don't understand. Why?"

She paused to look at him in the starlight. "Because if she had to die, at least some good can come of it. I didn't expect this. I didn't want it. But now it's happened—well, she and I had a lot in common." A sardonic note sounded in the woman's voice. "I couldn't help her when she was alive. But now she's dead, she can help me." Briskly she turned away, glancing around the sandy clearing. "Nobody will find her here. I know this desert pretty well. I grew up here. I can cover our tracks. But we'll have to dig deep. Let's get started."

They dug very deep. Tough roots tried to stop them; rocks rang under the shovel. Sand kept running back again into the grave until they had gone quite a way down. When the woman thought it was deep enough, she helped him bring Anne. Together they lowered her gently, in her bright summer dress, and laid her with the bad side of her face down upon the dark, curved cradle of her grave. The woman put Anne's handbag beside her and then stood up and dropped something small

upon the folds of the print dress, something that flashed once in the starlight as it fell.

"What was that?" Cliff asked, hushed.

"Never mind. Bring me the tarp, please."

They folded it over her before they shoveled the dirt back. She looked quite relaxed and at peace, lying there among the deep roots with the tarp to keep the sand off her face.

When it was finished, the extra earth scattered, the Joshua tree branches dragged back and forth over the spot, the woman said, "Go on back to the car. I'll be with you in a minute."

He went and sat quiet, watching her. She stood there motionless, looking down, for perhaps five minutes. The wind in the Joshuas made a strange rattling and whistling sound that was as lonely a noise as he thought he would ever hear again.

They drove back to the city together in silence.

"Where shall I drop you?" she asked as they came off the freeway.

"The Greyhound Bus Station is where I'm headed."

She pulled over to the curb on a cross street a little way from the station and sat there looking at him in the reflection of the street light. Her face was more like Anne's than ever, looking thin and drawn now as it had not when he had seen her earlier that evening.

"She told you about herself," she said. It wasn't a question, but he nodded. "All right. Now listen to me and pay very close attention. You and I committed a crime tonight. It wasn't our doing that she died. It was somebody else's doing. I've had to make the best of it. In a way it's lucky for you. The publicity would have been bad, and besides—" She looked down at the wheel and her hand clenched on it, and she smiled a thin smile. "And besides, I saw the answer to an old problem. But it was a crime we did. You and I are in it together. No matter what happens, no matter what you ever read or hear about this, no matter if they find her body or not—you'll be safe only as long as you never say a word to anyone. Do you understand that?"

Cliff nodded, his eyes not moving from hers.

"Don't ever think you can blackmail me," she went on. "The gun has your prints on it, and I've got the gun. We must both keep still as long as we live."

He thought about it, his hand on the door, ready to get out. He said, "Yes, I understand—most of it. But I wish you'd tell me what it was you dropped into the—in with her."

She smiled at him. He didn't smile back, but he was surprised to find how close he had drawn to her in the sharing of this terrible, this shattering thing. Since that

moment when he stood above Anne's body and looked up at the stars, he had known how alone he was. The knowledge had sunk in and it would be with him always, because it was the truth. But this was the kind of closeness two people can share even in their solitude. She was not a stranger any more. He almost knew before she spoke what she would say.

"Something that belongs to him," she said, not needing to speak the name. "His Phi Beta Kappa key, with his initials and school and date. If anybody ever finds it, he's finished. He had more of a motive than anybody alive. He pulled the trigger, really, in a way." Her smile grew tight and thin. "So now," she said, "*he* moves into second place. From tonight on I have the last word. What happened to Anne will never happen to me. I think she'd have liked that."

Cliff thought of Anne, lying there among the clasping roots. He nodded. "I think so too." He felt much better now, much solider, somehow, inside. Much surer of himself. In quite a firm voice, without any awkwardness in it, he said, "Well, goodnight. Goodnight, Mrs. Brewster."

"Goodnight," she said, and watched him walk away, his heels ringing solidly on the pavement of the early morning street.



Banks and Bettors

One of Brazil's great banks has a standard employment form that all tellers are required to fill out. Hidden among the mass of routine questions are two which ask: (1) What race horse do you consider the greatest that ever lived? (2) If you could have any amount of money you wished, what is the largest amount of money you would bet on this horse?

When reviewing the answers the personnel department overlooks the answer to the first question. But if the answer to the second question is more than $10.00 the applicant is not hired.



the strange case

While I should never suggest that you or I assume the role of a Mr. Pruyn, it was with a sigh of regret, I admit, that I concluded my association with the main character in this remarkable off-beater. I think you will feel quite as I do about this murderous little man, and the police, when you have finished with him. Or, rather, when he has finished with you . . .



by William F. Nolan

of Mr. Pruyn

BEFORE she could scream, his hand had closed over her mouth. Grinning, he drove a knee into her stomach and stepped quickly back, letting her spill writhing to the floor at his feet. He watched her gasp for breath.

Like a fish out of water, he thought, like a damn fish out of water.

He took off his blue service cap and wiped sweat from the leather band. Hot. Damned hot. He looked down at the girl. She was rolling, bumping the furniture, fighting to breathe. She wouldn't be able to scream until she got her breath back, and by then . . .

She emitted small gasping sounds; her eyes bugged and her mouth opened and closed, chopping at air.

You're not beautiful anyway, he thought, moving toward her with the knife. Pretty, but not beautiful. Beautiful women shouldn't die. Too rare. Sad to see beauty die. But, you . . .

He stood above her, looking down. Face all red and puffy. No lipstick. Not even pretty now. No prize package when she'd opened the door. If she'd been beautiful he would have gone on, told her he'd made a mistake, and gone on to the next apartment. But, she was nothing. Hair in pin curls. Apron. Nothing.

He knelt, caught her arm and pulled her to him. "Don't worry," he told her. "This will be quick."

He did not stop smiling.

He moved across the small living room to a chair and opened a black leather toolbag he had placed there. He hesitated, looked back at her.

"For you," he said, smiling over his shoulder. "Just for you."

He slowly withdrew a long-bladed hunting knife from the bag and held it up for her to see.

"A Mr. Pruyn out front, sir. Says he's here about the Sloane case."

"Send him on in," said Lieutenant Norman Bendix. He sighed and leaned back wearily in his swivel chair.

Hell, he thought, another one. My four-year-old kid could come in here and give me better stories. Stabbed her to death with my fountain pen, Daddy. Nuts!

Fifteen years with the force and he'd talked to dozens of Dopey Joes who "confessed" to unsolved murders they'd read about in the papers with Ben Franklin's kisser

on it. Oh, once he'd struck oil. Guy turned out to be telling the truth. All the facts checked out. Freak. Murderers are not likely to come in and tell the police all about how they did it. Usually it's a guy with a souped-up imagination and a few drinks too many under his belt. This Sloane case was a prime example. Five "confessions" already. Five duds.

Marcia Sloane. 27. Housewife. Dead in her apartment. Broad daylight. Her throat cut. No motives. No clues. Husband at work. Nobody saw anybody. Score to date: 0.

Bendix swore. Damn the papers! Rags. Splash gore all over the front page. All the gory details. *Except,* thought Bendix, the little ones, the ones that count. At least they didn't get those. Like the fact that the Sloane girl had exactly twenty-one cuts on her body below the throat; like the fact that her stomach bore a large bruise. She'd been kicked, and kicked hard, before her death. Little details—that only the killer would know. So, what happens? So a half-dozen addled pin-heads rush in to "confess" and I'm the boy that has to listen. Mr. Ears. Well, Norm kid, somebody's got to listen. Part of the daily grind.

Lieutenant Norman Bendix shook out a cigarette, lit it, and watched the office door open.

"Here he is, Lieutenant."

Bendix leaned forward across the desk, folding his hands. The cigarette jerked with his words. "Come in, Mr. Pruyn, come in."

A small man stood uneasily before the desk, bald, smiling nervously, twisting a gray felt hat.

About thirty-one or so, guessed Bendix. Probably a recluse. Lives alone in a small apartment. No hobbies. Broods a lot. They don't have to say a word. I can spot one a mile away.

"Are you the gentleman I'm to see about my murder?" asked the small man. His voice was high and uncertain. He blinked rapidly behind thick-rimmed glasses.

"I'm your man, Mr. Pruyn. Bendix is the name. Lieutenant Bendix. Won't you sit down?"

Bendix indicated a leather chair.

"Pruyn. Like in sign," said the bald little man. "Everyone mispronounces it, you know. An easy name to get wrong. But it's Pruyn. Emery T. Pruyn." He sat down.

"Well, Mr. Pruyn." Bendix was careful to get the name right. "Want to go ahead?"

"Uh—I *do* hope you are the correct gentleman. I should hate to repeat it all to someone else. I abhor repetition, you know." He blinked at Bendix.

"Believe me, I'm your man. Now, go ahead with your story."

Sure, Bendix thought, rave away. This office lacks one damned important item: a leather couch. He offered the small man a cigarette.

"Oh, no. No thank you, Lieutenant. I don't smoke."

Or *murder,* either, Bendix added

in his mind. All you do, Blinky, is read the papers.

"Is it true, Lieutenant, that the police have absolutely no clues to work on?"

"That's what it said in the papers. They get the facts, Mr. Pruyn."

"Yes. Well—I was naturally curious as to the job I had done." He paused to adjust his glasses. "May I assure you, from the outset, that I am indeed the guilty party. The crime of murder is on my hands."

Bendix nodded. Okay, Blinky, I'm impressed.

"I—uh—suppose you'll want to take my story down on tape or wire or however you—"

Bendix smiled. "Officer Barnhart will take down what you say. Learned shorthand in Junior High, didn't you, Pete?"

Barnhart grinned from the back of the room.

Emery Pruyn glanced nervously over his shoulder at the uniformed policeman seated near the door. "Oh," he said, "I didn't realize that the officer had remained. I thought that he—left."

"He's *very* quiet," said Bendix, exhaling a cloud of pale blue cigarette smoke. "Go on with your story, Mr. Pruyn."

"Of course. Yes. Well—I know I don't *look* like a murderer, Lieutenant Bendix, but then—" he chuckled softly, "—we seldom look like what we really are. Murderers, after all, can look like anybody."

Bendix fought back a yawn. Why do these jokers pick late afternoon to unload? God, he was hungry. If I let this character ramble on, I'll be here all night. Helen will blow her stack if I'm late for dinner again. Better pep things up. Ask him some leading questions.

"How did you get into Mrs. Sloane's apartment?"

"Disguise," said Pruyn with a shy smile. He sat forward in the leather chair. "I posed as a television man."

"You mean a television repair man?"

"Oh, no. Then I should never have gained entry since I had no way of knowing whether Mrs. Sloane had *called* a repair man. No, I took the role of a televison representative. I told Mrs. Sloane that her name had been chosen at random, along with four others in that vicinity, for a free converter."

"Converter?"

"To convert black and white television to color television. I read about them."

"I see. She let you in?"

"Oh, yes. She was utterly convinced, grateful that her name had been chosen, all excited and talking fast. You know, like women do."

Bendix nodded.

"Told me to come right in, that her husband would be delighted when he got home and found out what she'd won. Said it would be a wonderful surprise for him." Mr.

Pruyn smiled. "I walked right in carrying my bag and wearing some blue coveralls and a cap I'd bought the day before. Oh—do you want the name and address of the clothing store in order to verify—"

"That won't be necessary at the moment," Bendix cut in. "Just tell us about the crime first. We'll have time to pick up the details later."

"Oh, well, fine. I just thought—well, I put down my bag and—"

"Bag?"

"Yes. I carry a wrench and things in the bag."

"What for?"

"To use as murder weapons," smiled Pruyn, blinking. "I like to take them all along each time and use the one that fits."

"How do you mean?"

"Fits the personality. I simply choose the weapon which is, in my opinion, best suited. Each person has a distinctive personality."

"Then—" Bendix watched the little man's eyes behind the heavy lenses, "—you've killed before?"

"Of course, Lieutenant. Five times prior to Mrs. Sloane. Five ladies."

"And why have you waited to come to the police? Why haven't you confessed before now?"

"Because I chose not to. Because my goal had not been reached."

"Which was?"

"An even six. In the beginning I determined to kill exactly six women and then give myself up. Which I have done. Every man should have a goal in life. Mine was six murders."

"I see. Well—to get back to Mrs. Sloane. What happened after she let you in?"

"I put down my bag and walked back to her."

"Where was she?"

"In the middle of the room, watching me. Smiling. Very friendly. Asking me questions about how the converter worked. Not suspecting a thing. Not until . . ."

"Until what, Mr. Pruyn?"

"Until I wouldn't answer her. I just stood there, in front of her, smiling, not saying a word."

"What did she do?"

"Got nervous. Quit smiling. Asked me why I wasn't working on the set. But, I didn't say anything. I just watched the fear grow deep in her eyes." The little man paused; he was sweating, breathing hard now. "Fear is a really wonderful thing to watch in the eyes of a woman, Lieutenant, a *lovely* thing to watch."

"Go on."

"When she reached a certain point, I knew she'd scream. So, before she did, I clapped one hand over her mouth and kicked her."

Bendix drew in his breath sharply. "What did you say?"

"I said I kicked her—in the stomach—to knock the wind out of her. Then she couldn't scream."

Quickly Bendix stubbed out his cigarette. Maybe, he thought, may-

be . . . "Then what, Mr. Pruyn?"

"Then I walked to the bag and selected the knife. Long blade. Good steel. Then I walked back to Mrs. Sloane and cut her throat. It was very satisfying. A goal reached and conquered."

"Is that all?" Bendix asked.

Because if he tells me about twenty-one cuts, then he's our boy, thought Bendix. The kick in the stomach could be, just *could* be, something he'd figured out for himself. But, if he tells me about the cuts . . .

"Oh, there's more. I rolled her over and left my trademark."

"What kind of trademark?"

The small man grinned shyly behind the thick glasses. "Like the Sign of the Saint—or the Mark of Zorro," he said. "My initials. On her back. E.T.P. Emery T. Pruyn."

Bendix eased back in his chair, sighed, and lit a new cigarette.

"Then I removed the ears." He looked proud. "For my collection. I have six nice pairs now."

"Wouldn't have them *with* you, I don't suppose?"

"Oh, no, Lieutenant. I keep them at home—in a box, a metal box in my antique rosewood dresser."

"That's it, eh?"

"Yes, yes, it is. After I removed the ears, I left and went home. That was three days ago. I arranged my affairs, put things in order, and came here to you. I'm ready for my cell."

"No cell, Mr. Pruyn."

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?" Emery Pruyn's lower lip began to tremble. He stood up. "I—I don't understand."

"I mean you can go home now. Come back in the morning. Around eight. We'll get the details then—the name of the clothing store and all. Then, we'll see."

"But, I—I—"

"Goodnight, Mr. Pruyn. Officer Barnhart will show you out."

From the door of his office, Norman Bendix watched the two figures recede down the narrow hall.

An odd one, he thought, a *real* odd one.

He pulled the Ford out of the police parking lot and eased the car into the evening traffic.

So easy! So wonderfully satisfying and easy. Oh, the excitement of it—his sojourn into the Lion's Den. Almost like the excitement with the knife. That bit about the kick in the stomach. Dangerous, but wonderful! He remembered the Lieutenant's look when he'd mentioned the kick. Delicious!

Emery Pruyn smiled as he drove on. Much more excitement was ahead. Much more . . .

It hardly can be considered a surprise when a lady of questionable repute is found in a bedroom with her shoes off. Even in a bedroom not her own. But why go through all that trouble of hanging the loose lady so tightly from the closet door? These murderers—always thinking up something new!



death of a tramp

THE PHONE woke me. Outside it was still dark, but in March that could mean anything. My watch was on the dresser. It was nearly eight.

Tillie Monroe, the switchboard operator at Devensville, seemed agitated. "Sheriff Marking," she said, "you're wanted out at the Williamson place right away. There's . . . someone's dead."

The Williamson spread is twelve miles northeast of Devensville. My place is nearly five miles south of town. Besides being sheriff of Martin county, I ranch.

"Who is it?" I asked, fully awake now.

"I don't know. Some woman. Hung herself. Leastways, that's what they say."

"All right," I said. "I'm leaving right now." I hated to admit that I hadn't had breakfast. "Get hold of Sim Baker, Tillie, and tell him."

"Well, mercy sakes, Tom," she said irritably, "it's him that's a' callin' you. He's on the line now."

"Would you mind," I asked her quietly, "if I talked to him?"

"Yeah, Tom," Sim broke in. "I'm right here." Sim is my deputy.

"Right where?"

"At home. I just found out about it. Called you up as soon as I heard."

"Don't wait for me," I told him. "Go on out. I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

Outside it was still gray and a blanket of dirty cloud-film lay motionless over the prairie. Underfoot the thin layer of ancient snow was hard and discolored, pock-marked here and there by occasional shoots of sturdy prairie grass stubbornly ignoring the winter elements. Above the eastern horizon a faint tinge of pinkish hue proved circumstantially the existence of the sun.

I took the jeep. There wasn't

enough snow to hamper driving, but the roads between my place and Williamson's were rugged and I still hadn't gotten over babying my new Buick.

Sim was waiting for me in the Williamson yard when I drove up. His Model-A was parked near the house, next to a battered-looking, dusty 1946 Chevy. I parked and he climbed in beside me. He's a compact man of sixty. A handsome head of white hair sets off his craggy face, and when he greeted me I could see that he was wearing his gleeming teeth. We sat in the jeep and smoked while he filled me in on the details.

by J. W. Aaron



"It's Liz Peterson," he said. "Know her?"

I knew her. Twenty-five or six, married twice, divorced twice, a drinker, a party girl—the town tramp.

"Couldn't be sure at first," he continued, "'way her tongue and eyes are stickin' out, but it's Liz all right. Hung herself on the closet door in one of the guest rooms upstairs." He looked at me sourly. "Bartel is here, makin' like Dick Tracy. He looks kinda' rough. Wife's outa town right now, visitin' some folks in Denver. Bartel's probably been tom-cattin' pretty late these nights."

I nodded. Charley Bartel is the Devensville Police Chief.

"Only three dudes stayin' here right now," Sim said, "an' they're all in the same party. A woman an' two men. They got separate rooms—if *that* means anything. The woman's a real looker, an' one of the men looks like an actor. Other one's an old codger, fifty or so." Sim looked at me and the expression on his face was wink-sly. "Charley's been snoopin' around the woman like a bird dog."

I grunted. Despite the fact that he's a married man, Charley Bartel is proud of his carefully cultivated "lady-killer" reputation.

Sim threw his cigarette outside and began at once to build another. "Mrs. Donald found the body. They'd been a party last night, I guess. Bottles an' glasses strung out all over the place. She'd tidied up downstairs and went up to the guest rooms. Most of 'em empty this time of year, but this bein' Saturday she dusts 'em anyway. Later, after the guests is up, she usually goes back upstairs an' straightens out *their* rooms.

"Anyhow, Mrs. Donald barges right into this room that's supposed to be empty an' that's how the body was found. Hangin' on the closet door an' damn near lookin' Mrs. Donald in the eye."

He paused long enough to light his cigarette; then, holding the dead match in one hand and the live cigarette in the other, he leaned back and sighed loudly. "Oh, lessee. What else? Oh! Yeah. Well, Charley comes out here by hisself and sorta takes over. After he damn well felt like it . . . that's around seven-forty-five or so . . . he calls me up an' asks am I up yet? Then he said that it looked like he had to do all the police work that's done in this county, an' asks if I'd mind callin' the sheriff an' gettin' him out of bed an' gettin' him out here to do his job like he was elected to do?"

Sim exhaled a stream of smoke. "That's when I called you. And that's about it. I called up Pete Hardy, told him I had a coroner job for him an' to get hisself out to the Williamson place. He says, 'I know, I know all about it', but he ain't showed up yet which shows how people listen to me."

I nodded absently, said nothing.

"Ed Williamson just got back from Rapid City. Flew in this mornin' in that little plane of his. Bought some cows up there, I guess. He was real upset about the hangin', a'course, an' it didn't help none when he walked in an' caught the chief samplin' some of his best drinkin' liquor." Sim chuckled heartily at the memory, then sobered. "By the way," he said, "Ed says to tell you that he's in the den and to drop around when you have time."

We climbed out of the jeep then, walked across the yard to the impressive looking white-frame-and-brick house. This country is so big that most things in it look small. The Williamson house looks big.

Sim led the way upstairs to the death room. The blonde woman in the tight-fitting green dress was hanging from the closet door. Her nylon-clad toes missed scraping the floor by perhaps four inches. The rope around her neck snaked its way over the top hinge of the door and out of sight. The door was closed.

A yard from the suspended woman lay an upended straight-back chair. Beneath her reaching, searching toes—and two feet back away from the door—lay a pair of black, high-heeled pumps, tilted over on their sides. The backs of the shoes were bent, in and down, as though they had been small for her and she'd been forced to jam them on without a shoe horn.

In the middle of the room, his hands on his hips, stood Charley Bartel. Charley is a natty, smallish man of forty. He looks his age. He glanced at us briefly, muttered something under his breath, and looked away. I didn't want to get into a jurisdictional dispute with him, so I didn't ask him what he was doing this far from town.

"What does it look like, Charley?"

"Suicide, like as not," he said.

"How do you figure it?"

He transferred his hands from his hips to his back pockets and swaggered like a banty rooster around the dead woman. He regarded her from all angles in a queerly proud, almost possessive way, as if she were a tethered lioness and he had roped her.

"She made a loop in the rope," he said. "Then she threaded the other end of the rope over the top hinge in the door and tied it to the inside door knob and closed the door." He pointed to the fallen chair. "She pulled that over to the door and climbed up on it and stuck her head through the noose. Then she kicked the chair out from under her."

He grinned nastily. "Before it was over," he said, affectionately, "she did a lot of kicking. That's how she lost her shoes."

Sim moved close to the gently undulating form and studied tiny scratches on the hardwood door and on the wall beside the door.

"She must've changed her mind after she kicked the chair away."

The Chief nodded. "It was too late to change her mind. Door's too wide." To prove his point he took the woman's limp right arm and pointed it toward the knob. Her fingers fell pathetically short. "See?" he asked. "From where she hung she couldn't reach the knob. And the rope's tied on the *other* side, so even if she could've reached the knob and opened the door, that's still not saying she'd of been able to reach around and untie the rope." He shook his head pleasantly. "No, boys, after she kicked that chair out, it was too late to change her mind, even if she'd a' wanted to."

"And Lordy," Sim breathed, bending over and inspecting the tears in the toes of the woman's stockings, "how she must've wanted to."

I looked at Bartel. "Did you notify the coroner?"

"Sure. First thing."

"Anyone else?"

"What for?"

I turned to Sim. "Get hold of Milo. He'll be at his shop by now, most likely. Tell him to bring his camera paraphernalia. Police business, regular rates."

When Sim was gone I turned back to Charley. "I wonder when the coroner will be along. I'd like to have a look at the rope inside the door."

Charley strode to the door, grasped the knob, and swung the door open. "Hell, Marking, take a look. Hardy won't mind."

Even with the gruesome weight pulling against its hinge the door didn't groan as it opened. The rope —apparently a portion of ordinary clothesline—stretched tautly from the hinge to the door knob. It was wrapped around the knob several times and tied clumsily. Up near the top of the door, I noticed a slight fraying in the rope, extending downward for perhaps twelve inches. I pointed it out to Bartel.

"Sure," he said. "That hinge is sharp. Rope must've scraped against it."

"With the door closed," I said, "there wouldn't be any slippage because the rope would be pinched in place. It couldn't slip."

"Yeah, but every time we open the door we release the pinch." He shrugged. "Simple enough."

"What motive would she have for suicide, Charley?"

"There's something you maybe don't know, Marking. Liz was pregnant. About three months, I understand."

I *hadn't* known. I lit a cigarette, and studied the dead woman. "I wonder what she was doing out here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Bartel answered. "Mr. Carver would probably know."

"Who?"

He smiled a yellow smile. "I forget, you ain't met the guests yet.

Mr. Carver is one of the dudes."

"Where are the guests now?"

He shrugged. "Around someplace," he said vaguely.

"Why don't you round them up, Charley? Get them together in the living room downstairs. I'll have a look at them after I talk to Ed."

I found Ed Williamson behind the desk in his book-lined den. Ed is in his middle thirties, a year or two older than me. We've been friendly since our college days at A and M. He's a wiry man with a high forehead and prominent cheekbones. His normally clear eyes were clouded, partly from the lack of sleep and partly, I supposed, from the after-effects of the tall drink he held in his hands, and those which had preceded it. Cattle-buying trips to Rapid City chronically develop into drinking bouts once the sale is over.

Williamson runs an authentic ranch. After his father's death many years ago, he'd interested himself in breeding. From the beginning he favored a stout-hearted, white-face strain capable of shifting and foraging for themselves in a stern country, and now the *Big W* is by far the most famous brand in our locality.

Because he is single, because his ranch house is a local show place, and because it happens to be good business, he takes in dudes. His weekly rates—$75 and up—are fantastic for this part of the country. The dudes, mostly easterners, get privacy, atmosphere and relaxation in return. Most of them seem to think it's worth it.

Ed is rich enough to be stuffy, if anything like that exists in my country. It doesn't and he isn't. After he fixed my drink and handed it across to me he flopped down heavily in his chair and propped his mud-crusted boots up on the highly polished, solid mahogany desk in front of him. When I had settled myself in the chair he indicated my own boots went right up there across from his, partly because he expected it and mostly because it was comfortable.

He waited until we got our cigarettes going. "Tough about the girl," he said then.

"It is," I agreed. "Know her?"

"Sure. Liz Peterson."

"Any idea what she was doing out here?"

"None, Tom. She's never had any business out here, if that's what you mean. To my knowledge, she's never been here before."

I nodded. "Sim tells me you have three guests staying with you right now."

"That's right."

"Who are they?"

"Miss Everly, Mr. Burns and Mr. Carver."

"They're here together?"

"Yep. Miss Everly is the novelist, Marsha Everly. Maybe you've heard of her."

I shook my head.

Ed smiled. "I hadn't either. Mr. Burns—Elton—is her agent."

"And the other man? Mr. Carver?"

Ed shrugged. "A hanger-on. A nobody from nowhere."

"He's good-looking?"

Ed considered. "He's pretty," he decided at last.

"She keeps him?"

"Who?" he asked blankly.

"Miss Everly."

Ed looked pained. "I didn't say that, Tom. I don't know."

"Have any of the guests been here before?"

"Burns has. The agent. Three, four years ago, I think it was. The others are new to me."

"Sim tells me you flew in this morning from Rapid," I remarked, changing the subject.

"Yeah," he said. "Been up there four, five days."

"Buy any cattle?"

"Some. Not as many as last year. I don't know, the way the market is right now . . ." He let it hang.

"Who looks after things when you're gone?"

"You mean the ranch or the house?"

"The house."

"Mrs. Donald comes in every day from seven to seven. She cleans up, fixes the meals, stuff like that. Then, when I know I'm going to be gone for more than a day or two, I've been having Charley come out from town and look in on things once or twice a day. Check the furnace and so on."

"You mean Bartel?"

"Yeah."

"Nice of him."

"You know Charley. He thinks I have something to do with keeping him on as chief of that one-horse Devensville police force."

"Do you?"

Ed smiled.

I drained my glass and set it on the desk.

"Another?" he asked.

I stood up. "No thanks, Ed. I suppose I should be getting back on the job. The coroner's due any minute now."

A flicker of amusement played in the man's eyes. "I thought Charley was taking care of everything."

The guests were in the living room waiting for me.

The well-built, spectacularly pretty dark-haired woman was slumped in a huge chair, smoking impatiently. The shortish man with the pot belly and the big cigar and no hair wore a frown as he stood by the window studying the scenery outside intently and working the cigar back and forth in his mouth. The young man standing beside him was tall and lean. He seemed bored. They stared at me bleakly as I entered the room.

I identified myself, suggested they return to their rooms and stay there. I told them that I would be around shortly and interview them individually. I cautioned them to remember that this was merely

routine procedure, and I expressed the hope that the entire matter could be disposed of quickly. I asked if anyone had a question. No one did.

I nodded and stepped to one side, indicating that I considered them free to leave. For a moment or two no one moved. Then I watched the woman casually dispose of her cigarette in an ash tray, and heard the gentle whine of her stockings as she uncrossed her legs and rose from her chair. Her movements were deliberate, almost contemptuous, as she sauntered past me to the stairs. The others followed her out.

Charley and Sim were in the kitchen drinking coffee. "Is the coroner here yet?" I asked them.

They shook their heads.

"Do you suppose we should take the body down?"

Bartel grinned. "You'd think they'd teach you kids more than that up at college. Hardy'd skin us alive if we touched that body before he sees it."

"I'll be upstairs, talking to the dudes. Let me know when he shows up." Before I left them I motioned Sim to follow me into the dining room.

He looked at me questioningly. "Take a run into town," I told him. "Find out what you can about Liz . . . who's she been seeing lately, who her friends are. That sort of thing."

He nodded, turned to go. I held his arm. "Then you'd better see the states attorney. Tell him I think he should be here. Tell him I think it's murder."

Sim stared at me.

"I'd use the phone and tell him myself," I said, "but I don't want the call going through Tillie's switchboard. I don't want everybody in town knowing about this until we're sure."

Elton Burns seemed friendly. "Come in, Sheriff," he said. "Find a chair."

I waited until he had seated himself. "You're Miss Everly's agent?"

"That's right," he nodded. "I've been handling her properties for . . . oh, nine or ten years now."

"On vacation?"

"Partly. I'm in touch with some people in California concerning the possible sale of one of Miss Everly's novels. Picture people. You might say that I'm combining business with relaxation."

"And Miss Everly?"

He blinked. "How's that?"

"Is she taking a vacation?"

"Oh. Yes, that's about it. I was out here once before, several years ago. The country impressed me. I bragged it up a little, maybe. Anyway, when I told Marsha I was coming back here this year, she wanted to come along. She thought she might pick up some material. You know, local color. Stuff like that."

"And Mr. Carver? Is this a vacation for him too?"

Burns snorted. "He's been on vacation for thirty-three years."

"He doesn't look that old."

"He is."

I lit a cigarette. "There was a party here last night?"

"We had a few drinks."

"It broke up early?"

He thought about it. "Around midnight, I guess."

"Hear anything unusual during the night?"

"Nope. Slept like a log."

"Sleep late, did you?"

"Around here?" He shook his head. "Not this morning. Sounded like a convention going on out in the hall."

"That was the first you knew about the woman's death?"

"It was."

"Did you see her?"

"You mean this morning?"

"Yes."

"Sure. We all did."

"Ever see her before this morning?"

"Never."

"I see. Did the Chief question you?"

"The little guy? Nope. He said you'd be around later."

I smeared out my cigarette in an ash tray. "Do you get into town very much, Mr. Burns?"

"Twice, so far. Went to church last Sunday, and the Sunday before that."

"How long have you been here?"

"Wednesday it'll be three weeks."

I smiled. "You don't get around very much, Mr. Burns."

He leaned forward earnestly. "Look, Mr. . . . ah, it's Marking, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Look, Mr. Marking, I'm not trying to knock your town. But week after week, year in and year out, I get all the city living I want. I'm out here to get away from sidewalks and noise and stink."

"The others. They feel the same way about it?"

"Marsha does. Rod—Mr. Carver—is in town half the time. Any excuse at all will do. He *says* he goes to the movies."

"He gets home early, does he? From these movies, I mean."

"I wouldn't know. I'm usually in the sack by nine."

"I wonder what the dead girl was doing out here?"

He slapped his hands against his knees and shook his head. "You've got me, Sheriff. I wouldn't know."

I stood up. "That about covers it, Mr. Burns. Thanks for your time. You've been a big help."

He looked at me searchingly. "It is suicide, isn't it?"

"I . . . we don't know. Yet."

Marsha Everly looked older, close up. She'd been working at a small desk near the window. In horn-rimmed glasses she looked almost matronly.

"Interruptions annoy me, Sheriff," she said coldly. "Can we make

this visit as short as possible?"

I remained standing. "I'll try, ma'am." I looked at the pile of hand-written manuscript on her desk. "You're an author?"

"I'm a writer," she sighed wearily. "There's a difference."

"And Mr. Burns is your agent?"

"He is."

"Just . . . where does Mr. Carver fit in?"

"Tod? He's . . . my fiancee. Why?"

I shrugged. "Just trying to get the picture."

"Have you got it now?"

"I think I have," I told her.

"Good."

"There was a party here last night?" I asked.

"You could call it that."

"And it broke up about midnight?"

"About then. If you know all the answers, why ask me?"

"After the party, you went to your room?"

"I did."

"Did you go to sleep at once?"

"I bathed, read a little first."

"Did you hear any unusual noises during the night?"

"I did not."

"You were up early today?"

"About seven, I think. Mrs. Donald awakened me."

"Did you see the body?"

"Yes. The . . . the Chief took us into the death-room and asked us to view the remains."

"Had you ever seen the dead woman before this morning?"

"Hardly."

"I think that's about all, Miss Everly. Sorry I had to disturb you."

"Don't mention it. Close the door softly on your way out."

Tod Carver was in the bathroom, shaving. He was naked from the waist up. He was a leanly well-built, well-tanned young man with a smooth, hairless chest. I found myself agreeing with Ed. He did come very close to being pretty.

I asked him the usual questions, studying his manner and trying to evaluate his reactions. He seemed bored, his answers were careless.

"Then the first you knew of the dead woman was when you were awakened this morning?"

"That was the first I knew she was dead."

Maybe the surprise showed in my face. "You'd known her before?"

"I'd seen her around."

"Any place in particular?"

He rinsed his razor. "The Rod and Gun Club." He shrugged. "That other gin mill west of town. I forget the name."

"The Saddle Club?"

"That's it. The Saddle Club."

"Ever date her?"

"Once or twice," he admitted.

"Ever make her?" I asked him.

He looked at me and smiled. "Once or twice."

"That could turn out to be quite

an admission, Mr. Carver."

"Liz was quite a girl."

"You were seen with her?"

He shrugged. "It's no secret. She had a reputation, and I'm a stranger. Small town people remember strangers."

"What do you suppose she was doing out here last night?"

"Who?"

"Liz Peterson," I said patiently.

"Good question. You got me."

"You didn't see her last night?"

"I sure as hell didn't."

"Has she ever been out here with you?"

He looked off in the direction of Miss Everly's room and returned his gaze to me. "She sure as hell hasn't," he breathed fervently.

"Did Burns or Miss Everly know her?"

He shrugged again, carelessly. "I sure as hell don't know."

"You sure as hell better keep yourself available," I advised him.

He stared at me. He was wiping his razor when I left.

The den was deserted. I used the phone on the desk. After a moment the shrill, nasal voice of Tillie Monroe filtered through the instrument.

"Operator," she said.

"This is Sheriff Marking," I told her. "Are we alone?"

"What?"

"Are we on a closed circuit, or can others listen?"

"It's a closed circuit."

"Good. I need some answers and I think you can help me," I explained. "I must caution you not to repeat a word of our conversation to—"

"Why, Tom Marking!" she expostulated. "You know I *never* . . ."

"Of course, Tillie," I soothed. "More a reminder than anything else."

"Well, I should certainly *hope* so. I mean, after *all*."

"Tillie, within the last two or three weeks have there been any calls for Mr. Rod Carver?"

"You mean long distance calls?"

"Long distance or local."

"Well, there ain't been any long distance calls. Local, of course, I wouldn't be knowing about . . . unless I just happened to hear someone ask for him after I made the connection."

"And did you?"

"What?"

"Just happen to hear someone ask for him?"

"Oh. Yes, once or twice, now that I come to think about it. It was a woman. Both times. She called from. . . ." Tillie broke it off and backed up. "That is, as I *remember,* she called from the Rod and Gun Club."

"I see. And Mr. Carver was at home in each instance?"

"Yes. She talked to him both times. Seemed to think she had some kind of date with him. He was always polite, talked to her in a low voice. Sounded like a real

gentleman. From what little I heard, I mean."

"And did Mr. Carver indicate to the woman in these conversations that he intended to keep the appointment?"

"I really couldn't say, I'm sure," she informed me loftily. "After all, I wasn't *eavesdropping!*"

"Did Miss Everly receive any phone calls in the past two or three weeks?"

"No," Tillie admitted, "she didn't. But the man, Mr. Burns, did. Land, he must've run up sixty or seventy dollars in long distance tolls in the past week alone. Talking to California. It was about one of Miss Everly's books. Mr. Burns . . . he's her agent, I understand . . . an' some fellow in California named Jefferson have been haggling over how much the book was worth. And land sakes, Tom, you've no *idea* how much that Jefferson fellow was willing to pay. No book in the world's worth it to my notion, except maybe the Bible, but Mr. Burns kept laughing and telling him, 'No, no Barney, you've got to do a lot better'n that,' just like seventeen thousand dollars was cactus or something."

"I see. Now about today. How about giving me a rundown on the calls made from here this morning, Tillie?"

"Well, about seven-fifteen or so, Charley called the coroner. Then, a little while after that—around eight, I guess—Charley called Sim Baker. Then . . . lessee . . . I think it must've been around eight-thirty, Sim called the coroner. Then, somewheres around nine, Sim called Milo Ennis at his photo shop here in town. That's all the calls there was, Sheriff."

"You're sure you haven't forgotten any, Tillie?"

"Listen here, Tom Marking, I've been handling this switchboard since you was still running around in knee britches an' a snotty nose and I'll have you know. . . ."

I hung up; she was sure.

The coroner came with Milo Ennis. Milo looked grumpy. "You picked the day I'm due at the high school for class pictures," he told me accusingly as he lugged his equipment upstairs.

Pete Hardy waddled across the room to me. The coroner is a short, heavy-set man in his sixties. A horseshoe of white hair tops his balding dome and accentuates the red of his face. Something was bothering him.

"Has the deceased's family been notified?" he asked me in a low, confidential voice.

"She has no family that I know of, Pete."

He frowned. "Was she a woman of means, or will the county have to, ah . . . defray the expenses?"

"I don't know," I said. "The bank could tell you if she had an account or not." I checked my grin. "The phone's in there." I indicated

the den. Most county officials double in brass and Pete is no exception. In addition to being the coroner, he also owns the Hardy Funeral Home. Devensville boasts two mortuaries, and Pete isn't above using his official capacity to fudge a little on his competitor.

Pete was making his call when Bartel came out of the kitchen, wiping his mouth. "The states attorney just called, Marking. While you were upstairs. Said to tell you he was coming out. I'm to tell you he's coming with Sim."

"Okay," I nodded. "And Charley, where's Mrs. Donald? I haven't seen her all morning."

Bartel laughed. "Too much excitement for the old girl, I guess. She was running around here like a chicken with its head cut off. She wasn't doing no good here. I told her to go home. Told her I'd square things if Ed asked about her."

I nodded. "I can talk to her later, if necessary."

He looked at me narrowly. "What the hell do you suppose Gib Dolan wants out here?"

"I invited him," I said and went out in the yard. The registration card on the steering post of the dirty, beat-up Chevy listed Liz Peterson's age as twenty-four. I looked around a bit, walked down the short driveway to the road, then went back to the house.

Upstairs I stood quietly and watched Pete Hardy make a perfunctory examination of the deceased.

Milo finished his pictures and left.

Ed Williamson was in the kitchen, fixing a lunch for Bartel and the coroner.

The guests were in their rooms.

Gib Dolan, Sim and I held our conference in the den. Sim filled us in on what he had learned in town. It wasn't much, but one point was interesting: No one close to the dead girl seemed to know that she had been pregnant.

I gave them the information I had accumulated, trying to present the facts in an impartial manner. I spelled out my conclusions. The states attorney is a young man, competent and articulate. He's also ambitious. He listened intently.

When I had finished, the room grew still. In the silence the elderly clock on the wall hammered out its endless story, punctuated at irregular intervals by the rasp of Dolan's heavy breathing and by the roar of Sim's cigarette hack.

At last Dolan looked at me. "It stretches the imagination."

"It does," I agreed.

"Can we get a confession?"

I shrugged. "That depends."

He waved his arm wearily. "It doesn't matter. Be a little cleaner, maybe, but . . . what the hell. First, show us, Marking."

I led the way up to the death-room. Liz was gone. So was the rope. But I told them. "When I examined the body this morning, I

noticed that a section of rope inside the closet was frayed. The fraying was not caused by opening and closing the closet door. That simply won't hold water."

Dolan frowned. "How so?"

"Well, to begin with, when the door was shut, it would pinch against the rope and hold it in place. In other words, there'd be no slippage, and the hinge could hardly fray the rope. Now, when the door was opened, it's possible that the weight of the woman's body might cause the rope to give a little and scrape itself against the hinge. But in that case, the frayed portion would have been on the *outside* of the door, not on the *inside*."

Dolan nodded. "Sounds reasonable," he said.

"And if it wasn't suicide," I went on, "it had to be murder."

"But how was the job done?" Jim asked. "There was no sign of a struggle."

"I figure Liz must have been pretty drunk, if not completely unconscious. He slipped the noose around her neck, then pulled her to the closet. He opened the door and threaded the drag end of the rope over the top hinge. Then he went around to the other side of the door and towed on the rope until he had managed to pull her off the floor."

Dolan nodded again. "That must have been the way it happened," he agreed, reflectively. A new thought struck him. "What makes you think we'll find his prints on her shoes?"

I lit a cigarette. "Liz wasn't any lightweight," I said, "and hoisting her off the floor hadn't been as easy as he had thought it would be. When he finally got the job done, her feet didn't clear the floor by more than four or five inches.

"She may have been drunk when he hooked the rope around her neck, but she sobered up fast and died hard. She was fighting for her life and she wasn't passing up any bets. I figure she slipped her pumps off and eased them down onto the floor upright. By stretching her toes, she could reach the backs of the shoes and stand on them. That would account for the indentations we found in the backs of the pumps. It couldn't have been much support, but it must have relieved some of the tension from the rope; and it was probably keeping her alive."

"And he pulled them away?"

"Sure. That's why we found them where we did—lying together and only two feet away from the door. If she'd lost them in her struggles, they'd have been scattered and probably further from the door."

Dolan sighed. "That about ties everything in place, Tom. And real neat too, if it holds up."

"I think it will."

Nervously Dolan began pacing the floor, ticking off his assets on

the fingers of his left hand. "I can show a motive," he said, "and I can prove opportunity and ability." He stopped pacing suddenly and turned to Sim and me. "Let's do this thing by the numbers. Sim, round up the coroner and the Chief. Get them in here. Let's lay all our cards on the table and see what we've got."

As Sim was leaving, Dolan turned to me. "It's circumstantial without a confession. I can get first-degree without it," he said with a smile, "but I'd rather have the confession."

Charley Bartel trailed Pete Hardy into the den. Sim tagged along behind them. Dolan leaned against the closet door where Liz had hung a short while before. Gib looked at the coroner. "You've finished your examination?"

Hardy nodded. "It didn't take long."

"What's your conclusion?"

Hardy tipped his head and raised his eyebrows. "There ain't a mark of violence on the body. Outside of the rope marks around her neck, I mean."

"Are you going to order an autopsy?"

The coroner blinked. "I ain't give it much thought, Gib. I *can*."

Dolan lit a cigarette and nodded to me.

"Charley," I asked, looking at the little Chief, "how did you know Liz was pregnant?"

He shrugged. "Heard it around somewhere, I guess. I don't know."

"Her roommate hadn't heard. She didn't know a thing about it."

He shrugged again. "She wouldn't."

"Her friends at the Virginia Cafe, where she worked, hadn't heard about it."

"They wouldn't either."

"But *you* would?"

"I *did*," he answered defiantly.

"What time did you get here this morning?"

Bartel squinted at the ceiling. "Oh . . . must've been around seven, I guess."

Dolan ashed his cigarette delicately. "Who called you?"

"Nobody."

Dolan frowned. "Then what were you doing out here at seven in the morning?"

Bartel smiled. "I come out here every day while Ed's been away. Look things over, see that the furnace is okay, make sure everything is in working order. Why?"

"We know. Ed told us," I said. "But there are a few questions I'd like to ask you."

He seemed curious. "Such as?"

"How did you know that rope was tied around the door knob?"

"What the hell are you talking about, anyway?"

"About this morning, Charley. When Sim and I first came. I asked you how it looked to you. You told me then that the rope was tied around the *inside* door knob. How did you know?"

"Why I'd . . . I'd already opened the door. How the hell do you suppose?"

"But later, in the kitchen, when I suggested that we take the body down, you told me I should know better. You said the coroner would skin us alive if we moved the body before he had seen it."

"So?"

"So if you opened the door, like you just said, how did you know the rope was tied around the door knob? How did you *know* it wasn't merely slipped over the hinge and dangling on the inside and that the body wouldn't fall when you opened the door? Then *you'd* have been responsible for moving the body."

"Why, I . . ." he sputtered. "I assumed the rope was tied."

The coroner looked angry. "You'd be a hell of a lot better off if you quit 'assuming' things and started using your head."

"Okay," Bartel choked. "Okay. I made a mistake. But the rope *was* tied and the girl's body *didn't* fall. No harm done."

I let it pass. "You knew Liz Peterson pretty well?"

"I knew her," he admitted.

"Ever date her?"

"Once or twice."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"About fifteen minutes ago," he snapped.

"I mean alive."

"Four, five days ago, I guess. Maybe longer. How the hell should I know? I don't keep track."

"But you didn't see her today, or last night?"

"Alive?"

I nodded.

"No."

I moved close to him, close enough to see the tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead, almost close enough to smell the fear. "How did you get out here this morning, Charley?" I asked him.

"I . . . I drove."

"Where's your car?"

"Ain't . . . ain't it outside?"

I sighed. "Why don't you save your wind, Charley? Your car isn't here because you didn't drive it out here. You came out with Liz Peterson, in her car, last night after all the gin mills had closed. You knew Ed was gone. You knew the guests would be in bed. You knew you could have all the free liquor you could drink and, afterwards . . . you knew there were plenty of spare bedrooms upstairs. But the one thing you apparently *didn't* know was that Mrs. Donald showed up every morning at seven.

"Sometime early this morning, Liz overplayed her hand. She told you that she was pregnant, and that you were the father of her unborn child. She wanted money, didn't she, Charley?"

Bartel shook his head angrily. "You're nuts. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Sober," I said, "Liz probably wouldn't have attempted blackmail. Had you been sober yourself, you might not have killed her. But you weren't sober, and you did kill her."

"You'd better be able to prove that," Bartel whispered vehemently.

"Mrs. Donald's arrival this morning, just as you were leaving, tore it. The only thing you could do then was try to bluff it out. Give people the impression that you had been notified of the death and that you were out here in the line of duty."

"Prove it," he repeated tightly.

"You sent Mrs. Donald home not because she was distraught after you let her find Liz but because you wanted her removed from the area. Mrs. Donald would tell us that there was only one car in the yard when she drove up, and that it wasn't yours."

"Prove it!" he rasped. "Liz was pregnant. Don't forget that. That's a hell of a good motive for suicide."

I shook my head. "Liz wasn't pregnant, Charley. She just told you she was."

Bartel stared. "Who the hell was the genius that figured *that* out?"

I turned to Hardy, who verified my statement with a nod.

Bartel turned back to me and laughed. He jabbed a thumb at the coroner. "You ain't going by what *that* ambulance chaser tells you, are you? How the hell would *he* know? It takes a pathologist to conduct an autopsy, and he sure as hell ain't no pathologist. He ain't even a good undertaker."

"I'm good enough to know she wasn't pregnant," Hardy replied calmly. "Other doctors will back me up. Any bets?"

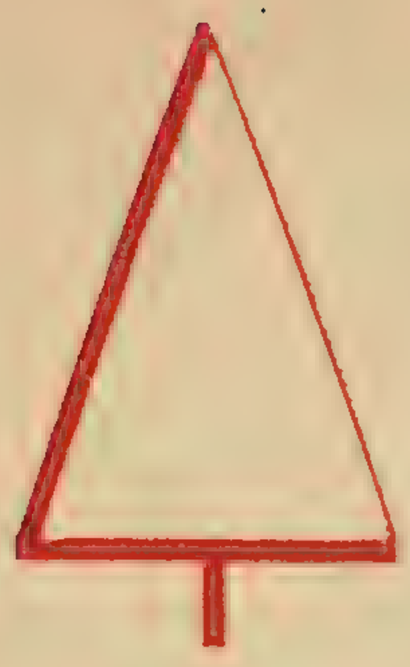
I stood over Bartel. "She sandbagged you, Charley," I told him. "In doing so, she left you with a motive that couldn't possibly fit anyone else."

"You can't prove a word of it! I deny everything. You've got nothing!"

"We've got everything," I told him quietly. "We'll print her car, and we'll find plenty of your prints. We'll print her shoes, and we'll find your prints on them too. We'll print every bottle in this house and we'll find some with your prints. Unless I'm mistaken we'll find Liz Peterson's prints on the same bottles. We'll . . ."

At first, as I watched his narrow body shaking, I thought he was coughing. Then he buried his face in his hands and bobbed his head hopelessly. "Somebody shut that sonofabitch up," he moaned. "Just shut him up and leave me alone."





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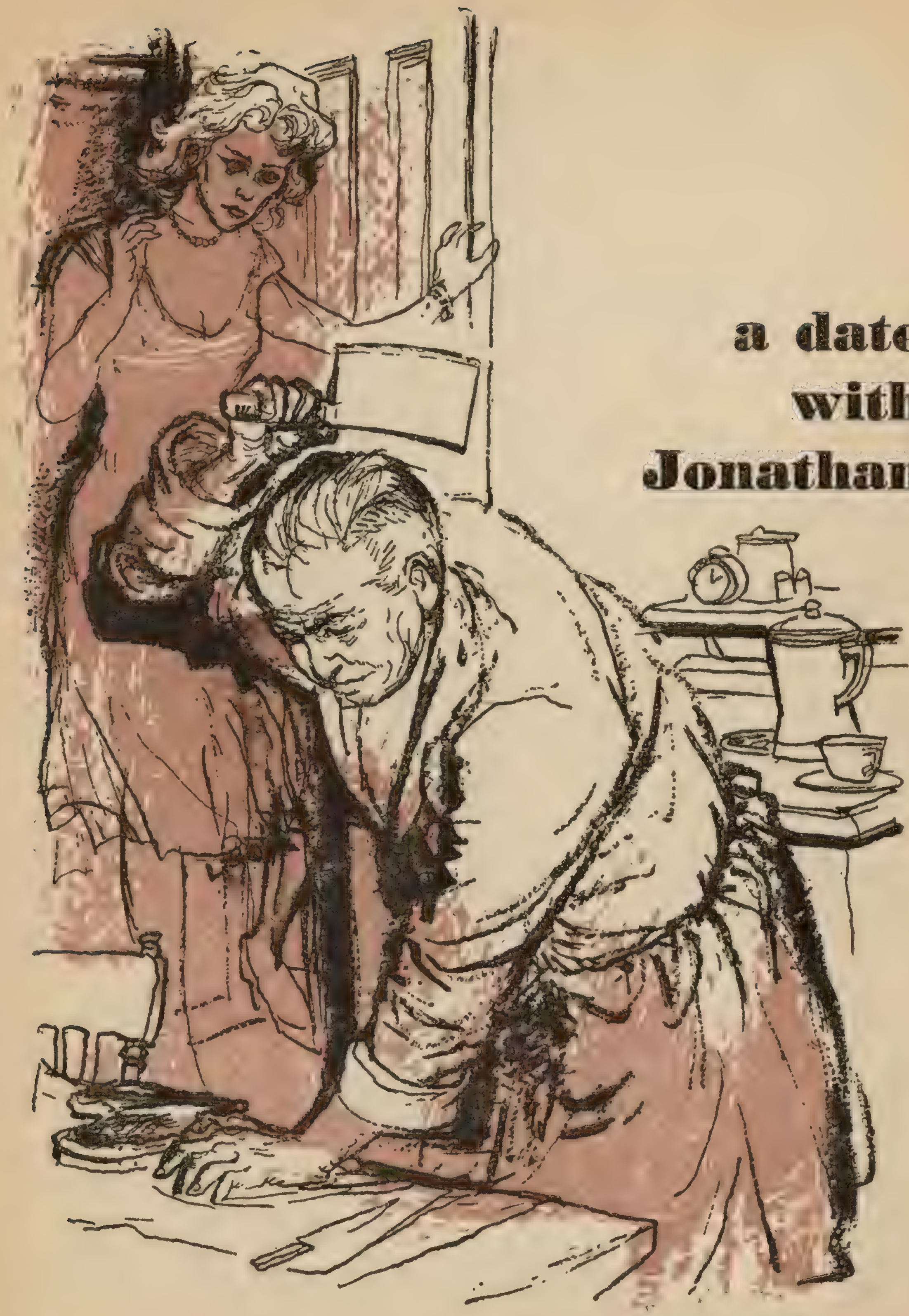
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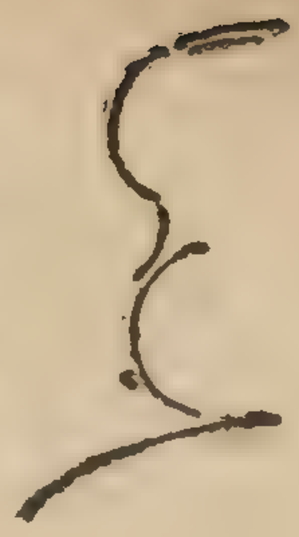
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a date with Jonathan



If people weren't constantly talking too much and thereby getting themselves killed, a frightening depression would occur in a business that shall remain nameless. Which makes it something of a dilemma, therefore, whether to cheer for Lurline or her garrulous bat of a mother in this—ah—slice of life—here presented for your entertainment. Ugh!



by Sam Merwin, Jr.

LURLINE CASSIDY finished sewing the scrap of veil on her little black hat. Then she held the hat up, turning it, appraising it.

Across the green-walled rectangle of the hotel room, Lurline's mother, Martha, was busily painting a cigar box. She liked to give the boxes she decorated to friends or acquaintances on birthdays and Christmas.

"Everybody sends cards," she enjoyed saying with a supercilious tilt of her head, a smug dilation of thin nostrils. "I think it's so much *nicer* to give something you've done yourself. Long fingers touched pale, henna-dyed hair. "It conveys so much more."

Martha was talking as she painted—as usual, whenever her daughter got home from the department store where she sold ladies' dresses, marked down. Also as usual, she was talking about Hollywood, about the scandals of the old days, when she had been a young widow and Lurline, her hair tediously arranged in Shirley Temple ringlets, had had tiny bit parts and been the family meal ticket, something she still was.

Martha interrupted her chatter to regard Lurline, noted the hat and said, "really, that's very clever —almost like a new hat." Then, shaking her head, "It's a pity you had to take after your father instead of my side of the family. You were such an adorable moppet. If only you could have stayed that way a year or two longer, I feel certain as I'm sitting right here that you'd have been a star."

"Yes, Martha," Lurline replied dutifully. She seldom bothered to point out her mother's inconsistencies any more. They occurred so frequently, and the arguments that resulted when she did try to straighten Martha out invariably ended in confusion, recrimination and tears.

She arose and tried on the hat in front of the battered hotel dress-

er's mirror. The wisp of veil that just shadowed her eyes gave a touch of glamour to her prematurely old, over-made-up face. But like her mother, whom she closely resembled, she was still a small, rather dainty, sapless creature with thin lips and board-flat bosom.

She had an hour before she was to meet Jonathan on the corner of Lexington Avenue. She didn't dare let him come to the hotel and call from the desk downstairs. Martha was always dead set against her having dates or any hint of romance with anyone she considered ordinary. And Jonathan Calder sold shoes.

Martha was still talking about Hollywood, still dabbling at the cigar box. She had, somehow, rambled all the way back to the William Desmond Taylor murder, more than thirty years in the past. "Think of it," she marveled in her dry, terribly cultured voice. "A great career like Mary Myles Minter ruined—wiped out as if by a blackboard eraser—just at a breath of scandal. Such a pity! And Mabel Normand, too."

There was a pause and Lurline decided to take the plunge. "Martha," she said, "I think I'd like to go to a movie."

Martha lifted her brush from the box. "I think that would be just lovely," she said. "I've been sitting in here all day. What shall we see? They say that French picture—Oh, what is the name of it?"

"Mother." Lurline knew that using *mother* instead of *Martha,* which her mother preferred because it made her feel younger, would halt the unending flow of chatter. "Mother, I want to go alone."

The older woman's patrician pose vanished. She suddenly appeared thoroughly hard, cruel. "Lurline, you're lying. You're going out with a man. What is it this time—some ribbon clerk?"

It was close enough to hurt. Shoes were not in a higher class than ribbons. Lurline started crying.

"And you can stop sniveling," said Martha decisively. "You can't fool me with those tears. You're not a good enough actress."

Anger made Lurline's throat feel tight and caused a little vein to jump just below the left corner of her jaw. Yet, in her own ears, her voice sounded small and ineffectual as she said, "Maybe I'm not a good actress, but I'm a woman—a woman thirty-three years old, and I—"

"Twenty-seven—you're twenty-seven years old, dear." Martha's bland serenity made the incredible lie almost convincing. "You're only twenty-seven, Lurline, so there's still lots of time to wait for Mr. Right to come along. It's your future—your happiness—your security—I'm thinking of. You can't afford to throw your life away on some— some—"

Lurline turned and fled from the room. She tried the bathroom door down the hall, but it was locked. She cried harder because she had no privacy for her grief. In this wreck of an old New York hotel, she and her mother shared bathroom and kitchen privileges with the other residents of the sixth floor front.

A deep, offkey male voice was humming an old song of the twenties—*Ukelele Lady*—in the kitchen. It was Major Farwell, a genial, disabled World War I flier, who spent his time commuting between the hotel and Veterans' hospitals. Lurline dried her eyes. She didn't feel like exchanging pleasantries with the Major. But she didn't feel like going back to the room to face her mother—not just yet.

". . . Ukelele Lady lika *you,*" came from the kitchen, the final syllable punctuated by a dull splatting sound. Lurline moved to the open kitchen door and looked in. Major Farwell, grizzled and stout, wore his familiar blue hospital robe and slippers. He lifted his arm, as Lurline watched, to deliver a resounding thwack to a piece of meat with the flat of a cleaver. He saw Lurline and paused, saying, "Hope I'm not disturbing you, m'dear, but I've been looking forward to cube steak for breakfast tomorrow, and the confounded butcher didn't do the job right." He delivered another blow with the heavy meat cleaver.

Lurline stood nursing her anguish while the major finished preparing the steak, put it in the icebox and returned the cleaver to its hook above the long sink.

"There!" he said, moving toward the door. "That should do it." He winked at Lurline, as he winked at all women, and added with an intoxicated air, "My, you're looking mighty pretty tonight, Miss Lurline. If you don't look out, you'll become as big a threat to us men as your mother."

Lurline moved aside to let the major pass. She said nothing, because she could not speak—the Major's remark, coming on top of the scene with her mother, made her physically ill. She watched the Major go to his room, then took a deep breath and marched back to her own door, opened it and went inside.

"Mother," she said. "I want you to know I'm going out with . . ." Her voice trailed off as she saw what Martha was doing. "You're tearing my hat!"

Mrs. Martha Cassidy did not reply. She went right on completing the demolition of the little hat with its wisp of veil.

Lurline stood and watched as she had watched the Major prepare his steak. Suddenly she turned and left the room. She went to the kitchen, took down the cleaver, returned to the room and hit her mother with it, hard, on the side of the head. Martha made an odd

little grunting noise as she went down on her hands and knees. Lurline hit her again with the flat of the cleaver, knocking her mother over on her side. Then she brought it down hard, pounding Martha's head into the carpet, like the Major pounding the steak flat to the block.

She stood there, breathing a little hard, looking down at her mother. Her mother was dead—one whole side of her skull was soft and squishy. Her left eye had been sprung loose from its socket by the force of the blows and hung, dangling like a pendulum. There was very little blood, for which Lurline was grateful. She didn't think she could have stood it, if it had been messy.

Her first thought was, *Well, I've done it. I've really gone and done it!* It were almost as if she had been thinking of killing Martha all along. But, actually, she couldn't remember ever having had the impulse before. Her second thought was, *I suppose I'd better do something about cleaning this up,* though her mother had always protected her from anything that might possibly have been considered menial. She looked at the clock and discovered she still had fifteen minutes before her date with Jonathan.

She decided to put Martha down the kitchen incinerator. Unless she was awfully unlucky, there was small chance of anyone seeing her. The two girls that shared a room at the other end of the hall were never in after six, and Major Farwell had had liquor on his breath, as usual, when he passed her on his way from the kitchen. So he'd be safe in his room. That left only old Mrs. Paskman, with a room next to the girls. It must have been Mrs. Paskman who had been in the bathroom earlier.

Lurline went out and checked, found that the old woman had returned to her room. She went back and got her hands under Martha's shoulders and began pulling her toward the door. It was awkward, but not as difficult as Lurline had feared it would be. Martha weighed less than a hundred pounds. And though she was small, and the incinerator system an old-fashioned one with a large opening, on each floor, it was a tight squeeze.

Lurline got the cleaver next and hung it in place and then hurried to the bathroom to wash.

The phone in the room was ringing when she emerged, and Lurline had to run to answer it. She hoped the hotel people hadn't discovered Martha's body so soon. For a moment she hesitated, her hand stopped in mid-air before the instrument. If she answered, and it was the hotel, it would ruin her date with Jonathan. She could think of nothing worse. As she paused, unable to decide, it rang once again, peremptorily. Thirty-

three years of obedience had its way. She picked up the receiver, said hello.

It was Jonathan. He said, in his rather flat, Midwestern voice, "Miss Cassidy? I'm terribly sorry, but I won't be able to keep our date tonight. You see a friend of mine has gotten sick, and I've got to stay with him. So I'll have to ask for a raincheck. I hope I haven't caused you any trouble, Miss Cassidy."

Before she put down the phone, Lurline managed to say, "No—no trouble at all."

Full House in the Big House

A warden of a midwest prison received a tip that within the next few days three lifers were going to make a break. Although the informant revealed their names, he said he knew they also had hidden weapons, but had no idea where the three men had put them. The warden knew that by placing the men in solitary he could stop the break. But he wanted the guns and ammunition to stop bloodshed in the future.

He had the three men brought to his office. He told them he knew their plans and could stop the break by putting them in solitary, but what he really wanted was their guns. He then took out a deck of playing cards. He would play them one hand of draw poker. If one of the three men drew high hand they could return to their cells, no further questions asked. If he drew high hand, they would tell him where the guns were. The men agreed. First man drew a pair; second man, two pair . . . third man, three of a kind. The warden turned over his cards . . . full house. The men stood by their bargain and led the warden to the guns.

Returning to his office his assistant asked him why he took such a big risk. "It was no risk at all," explained the warden. A professional card sharp taught me how to do this when he was a con here years ago."

a soft spot for Maddy



Brandishing a mallet whilst sitting beside a baby carriage or caressing a bottle marked "Poison" as I stir Grandmother's nocturnal chocolate has not won for me a reputation as a sentimentalist—though I hasten to add these acts were committed to the celluloid of television.

Nevertheless, sentiment is an endearing quality. Freddie had sentiment. He'd go to any length to keep from degrading Maddy, or humiliating her . . .

by Fletcher Flora

FREDDIE FOLEY had this soft spot for Maddy Dakin. A soft spot as big as a silver dollar right in the middle of the old ticker. A lot of girls a guy would go for in a big way for one or more of various reasons, like they were really stacked or looked classy in their clothes or were good workers in close, lots of reasons like those, but it was different with Maddy. There just didn't seem to be anything special about Maddy at all. Oh, not that she was a goon or had anything actually wrong with her, and as a matter of fact she was sort of small and neat and pretty enough in a conservative way, but it was just that she didn't have anything *special*.

Maybe it was because she got next to Freddie young. A guy remembers what happened to him young. He remembers it and builds it up in his mind as being a hell of a lot more than it really was, and he gets to be a sucker for it. Like Freddie. He remembered how he used to take Maddy to these crummy high school football games, and she'd let him feel her knee under the blanket, and how she looked all moist and excited and just too damn happy in her cheezy little voil formal the night of the senior dance when they were graduating—which he'd thought a thousand times he'd never make and damn near hadn't—and most of all he remembered the summer night soon afterward when he'd borrowed a jalopie from a buddy and had driven her out to this place along the river where people parked and the cops didn't bother you about it.

He'd thought she might be sort of scared and reluctant and have to be coaxed and all, but it didn't turn out that way, to his surprise, and as a matter of fact she was pretty fierce and aggressive, as if she were afraid he'd change his mind and chicken out at the last minute, and afterward she cried about it. She didn't cry because she was scared or sorry or anything like that, and as far as he could understand it she seemed to be crying because she was happy in the same way she'd been happy at the dance in the cheezy voil, only more so. She huddled against him in the front seat of the jalopie, crying and crying in this terribly quiet way with the tears rolling down her cheeks and getting into her voice, and she said, "Oh, Jesus, Jesus, Freddie, don't ever leave me. You ever leave me, Freddie, I'll die, I'll simply die, and I swear to Jesus I will."

The way she said Jesus like that made a big impression on Freddie, because she didn't use profane or dirty words like a lot of girls, and it was plain that she wasn't swearing at all, but was saying a kind

of prayer. The thing about it was, the impressive thing, she was saying the prayer to *him,* to Freddie Foley, and it made him feel big, *big,* like God, like everything in the world and the whole damn universe belonged to Freddie Foley God, the trees and the river, the moon and the stars up there above the river, just every single thing there was.

Freddie didn't forget all this. You've got to give him credit. Even after he got away from home and got associated with Duke Gore's outfit, he didn't forget. At first, of course, he was just a sort of errand boy for the Duke, nothing that amounted to much, but the Duke always had an eye out for new blood, young guys with talent coming up, and he took a liking to Freddie because Freddie was a hard worker who took things seriously and was always ready to undertake anything that was asked of him. A lot of these young guys were always shooting the angles and looking for shortcuts to where they wanted to go, but Freddie played by the rules and could be relied on to do a thing right, and Duke liked this. He'd make a point of giving Freddie a good word now and then, just to let him know he was keeping an eye on him, and he kept giving him a little bigger cut in this or that operation. After a while Freddie was making a hell of a lot of money and had plenty of important connections besides.

The thing that really put him in solid with the Duke, though, was the time he saved the Duke's life, which was in all the papers at the time, and also later when Freddie was tried for it. The reason he was tried, he killed a guy who tried to kill the Duke and would have succeeded, too, if Freddie hadn't been around. This guy was someone the Duke had pulled a fast deal on, and he went crazy over it. He laid for the Duke on the street at a spot the Duke had to pass, and he got in behind the Duke with this .45 and was about to shoot him in the back, but Freddie was there and shot the crazy guy first. Naturally the Duke was grateful for this, and he had his own lawyer handle Freddie's case, and Freddie got out of it. The only real trouble they had was because Freddie didn't have any permit for this gun he was carrying, the gun he used to kill the guy with, but they smoothed it over.

Anyhow, after the trial, Freddie was really uptown, and he had all these connections and knew all these really classy dames who were mostly entertainers in various places, and you'd think that he might have forgotten Maddy by that time, which you really couldn't blame him for if he had, but he hadn't. He got this big apartment with a lot of blond furniture and a bar and all, and he moved Maddy in. Of course he had a one-night

stand now and then with one or another of these classy women he knew, the singers and dancers and such, but he was careful not to let Maddy find out about it, her not being hurt by what she didn't know, and she was the only one he kept up a regular relationship with. He was good to her, and bought her all kinds of fancy clothes and jewelry and stuff with the big money he was taking in on the cuts, and he even talked once or twice about their getting married someday when he found the time, but he never found it. What it was, he had this soft spot.

Everything went along like this for quite a long time, couple of years or so, and chances are it would have gone on for a lot longer, maybe forever, if it hadn't been for this long, limber blonde named Moira. A strip dancer was what she was, but she didn't take it off in any of these crummy dumps like most of the bump and grind babies work in, and she didn't even bump and grind, so far as that goes. She had worked out these tricky little routines that she called art, and she moved around and dropped her panties to high-brow music like Stravinsky or someone like that, and it caught on. She worked the good clubs for a lot of dough and had been married three times without much luck. The point is, she got booked into one of the Duke's clubs, and Freddie saw her and went for her, hard, and she went for him, too, and things got complicated.

What complicated things was Maddy. All the other times Freddie had gone for someone, it had been on a temporary basis, which was understood and agreeable on both sides, and Maddy hadn't made any difference one way or another. As it turned out, though, this Moira had some very peculiar ideas, which may have been put into her head by undressing to Stravinsky, and one of these peculiar ideas was that a girl ought to have a license to shack up. At first Freddie couldn't see this as being essential to the arrangement, and he said so.

"Well," Moira said, "it may not seem essential to you, but it does to me. You can take it or leave it."

"You mean to tell me," Freddie said, "that there's nothing doing unless we get married?"

"That's right, honey," Moira said. "You're number four or a goose egg."

By this time, Freddie was in quite a condition over this limber blonde, to say the least, and he was ready to marry her or anything else that was necessary to getting things settled satisfactorily, but he kept thinking about Maddy, how she'd take it and all, and he knew she'd take it damn hard. The way he saw it, what with this soft spot he had, she was a kind of childhood sweetheart who'd always loved him and been faithful

to him and hadn't, moreover, been unreasonable about legal commitments and such things, and one thing you didn't do, you didn't break the heart of your childhood sweetheart who'd practically prayed to you and made you feel like God.

"The truth is," he said, "I've already got a permanent arrangement."

"You mean you're already *married?"* Moira said.

"No," he said, "not exactly. It's only that I've got things set up with this girl sort of permanently."

"Well," she said briskly, "you can get it *unset* permanently, or you can stay away from me permanently, and in the meanwhile you don't need to come back until you've made up your mind about it one way or the other."

The trouble was, she meant it. Freddie sweat it out for a week or ten days, thinking she'd give in eventually, but it finally got across to him that this limber blonde Moira wasn't a giving-in kind of woman, and he went to see the Duke. He respected the Duke and was willing to take his advice on most matters, but in this case the Duke couldn't see that he had any problem.

"It's simple," the Duke said. "You unload this dame, that's all."

"The truth is," Freddie said, "I've got a soft spot in my heart for her and don't want to do it."

"In my opinion," the Duke said, "a soft spot in the heart is the same as a soft spot in the head."

This struck Freddie as being pretty sharp, one of those little epigrams you sometimes read and remember, and he decided that it was true. The only thing to do was to get it over with quickly, the same way you jerked a piece of tape off a hairy spot, and he went up to the apartment with all the blond furniture and the bar in it. Maddy was waiting for him, like she always was, even when he hadn't been around for a week or more, and they had a couple of drinks and got to talking, and after a while he had a third drink and thought he was ready to tell her.

"Look, baby," he said, "there's something you got to know."

"What is it?" she said.

"Well," he said, "it's pretty damn important to both of us."

She looked at him with her eyes sort of clouded up and solemn, waiting for him to tell her what it was that was so important, and he got to remembering all the things that had happened, feeling her knee at the football games and taking her to the dance in the cheezy voil and having her the first time out there by the river, and he couldn't come out with it, it was simply impossible, and pretty soon she said, "Are you in trouble again, honey? If you're in trouble, I want to be in it with you," and that tore it for sure. She was a genuine lady, that's what she was,

and you couldn't just throw a genuine lady out on her can like any tramp. It was sure to make her feel degraded and washed up and not wanted any more, and it wasn't right to do it.

"Forget it, baby," he said. "It's no trouble, and I guess it's not so important after all."

He stayed around a while longer and then left and went down to a club of the Duke's, a dark little place on a crummy street, not the fancy spot where Moira was taking it off to Stravinsky. He went there because he wanted to see a fellow called Slivers who patronized the place. This Slivers was a fellow who did odd jobs for the Duke, and when he came in Freddie beckoned him over and bought a drink.

"I'm wondering if you'd like to do a little work," he said.

"For the Duke?" Slivers said.

"No. For me personally."

"Well, I got nothing on hand right now. I might be interested if the fee's right."

"Five hundred."

"The Duke pays me a thousand."

"This is simple work. Fast and easy. No risk. It's like finding the money in the street."

"If it's so easy, why don't you handle it yourself?"

"Reasons. Personal ones. You interested or not?"

"I'm listening."

"There's this girl. She lives in apartment 503 out at Castle Arms. I pay the rent. I just came from there, and she's alone. She'll be alone, because I'm the only one who goes there, and I'm not going back."

"What are the risks?"

"I already told you. None. She's alone. The place is even soundproof. You walk up and do it and walk away, that's all."

"When do I get the five hundred?"

"I'll wait here for you."

"Okay."

Slivers stood up, started away.

"Do it neat," Freddie said.

"I always do it neat," Slivers said.

After he was gone, Freddie carried his glass over to the bar and got it filled up again.

"Remember that I'm here," he said to the bartender. "I'll be here all evening."

He went back to his table with his full glass and sat down. It was funny, he thought, how it was when you had a soft spot for someone. You'd go to all kinds of trouble to keep from humiliating them or making them feel bad or anything like that.



I take a morbid pleasure in introducing to you a hustler's hustler, one of the fastest of the fast boys. Meet Mitch Allison, a rollicking, and dangerous, rogue—a man who can drop his best friend into a cesspool and walk away laughing.



the Cellini Chalice

A Novelette

by Jim Thompson

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON when Mitch Allison reached the last shabby house in a shabby block of houses, and he was cursing himself for eighteen kinds of a sap. He hadn't made a nickle all day. He hadn't made bean money all week. Well, if this was the best Doc Krug could do for a hustling man, he, Doc Krug, could shove it. Doc was supposed to be a sharpie. Supposedly, he could always put a fast boy next to a good thing. But all he'd put Mitch next to was being broke.

Mitch knocked on the door of the house. He waited a second, then pounded, adding an angry kick for good measure. The door opened suddenly, and a redhead glared out at him. She was young, built like a brick henhouse in windy country. Judging by the nightgown beneath her half-opened robe, she had been asleep.

"Beat it!" she snapped. "Whatever you're selling, I don't want any."

Mitch smiled apologetically, flashing one of Doc Krug's business cards. The card identified him as an associate with Krug & Co., San Diego's largest buyer of precious metals and old jewelry.

"I'm not selling a thing, lady. I'm here to—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." The girl cut him off impatiently. "I've heard the spiel before. What would I have that was worth any dough?"

Mitch's smile vanished. He was about to say that she had plenty that was worth dough, and that she was doubtless selling it regu-



larly. But then he saw the thing—the cup or the bowl or whatever the hell it was. And the insulting words died in his throat.

"I'm terribly sorry to have disturbed you, madam," he said earnestly. "I did hope you might have some old trinkets I could purchase, but since you haven't . . ." He gave her a courtly bow. The girl's face and her voice softened.

"I really don't have a thing, mister. And I'm sorry if I was rude. You see, I work all night in a restaurant and—" She broke off with a gasp. "What's the matter? For

God's sake, what's the matter?"

Mitch didn't answer. He simply moaned, clutching at his heart, his handsome face contorted with pain. The girl's reaction was exactly what he hoped it to be. She was one of those tough babies. All the toughies had a soft streak; they were easier to handle, really, than the so-called softies.

So, less than a minute after he had gone into his act, he was seated in the living room, sipping at the glass of water which she held to his mouth.

Bent over him as she was, she gave him plenty to look at. Unfortunately, he couldn't be bothered, at the moment. His seemingly closed eyes were fixed on a shelf near the window, attempting to appraise the cup-shaped object which stood there betwixt a withering potted plant and a battered alarm clock.

Doc Krug had tried to drum some knowledge of antiques into him. It was necessary, Doc pointed out, if Mitch was to work with him in fencing hot items. Moreover, Mitch had the hustler's instinct for something good—for a tangible or intangible that could be turned for a big dollar. Still, he had no real idea of what the thing on the shelf was worth.

All he knew was that (1) it must be worth a wad, and (2) he'd get it away from the babe if he had to slug her.

"Better now?" Her anxious voice interrupted his thoughts. "Answer me, please!"

Mitch allowed his eyes to flutter open. He gave her a brave, weak smile.

"I'm all right, now, thanks to you. You saved my life, Miss—Miss—"

"Turner. Peggy Turner. What was it, your heart?"

Mitch nodded. "It's my own fault, I suppose, for leaving the hospital this morning. But I'd been there so long. Two years of lying on my back, accepting charity . . ."

"Charity?" She frowned at him suspiciously.

Mitch continued, lying with the smoothness of long practice. "My good friend Doctor Krug lent me some clothes. He gave me this job, and a little money to work with. I wish I could justify his faith in me. But"—he sighed heavily—"I haven't made a purchase all day, and it doesn't look like I will. So the only honorable thing for me to do is to quit."

"But—what will happen to you? How will you live?"

"It doesn't matter," Mitch said gently. "I don't have long to live, anyway."

It went against his hustler's pride to deal out such terrible corn. But Peggy Turner was lapping it up. Timidly, she suggested lending him a few dollars. He refused it with a firm smile of thanks.

"I do wish you had something I might buy from you, Miss

Turner, but since you haven't, I'll—"

"I really don't, Mr. Allison. Honest, I don't." Her tear-dimmed eyes strayed to the shelf. "Except maybe that old goblet. But I doubt that'd be any good to you."

"I'm afraid not," Mitch said doubtfully. "Of course, it wouldn't hurt to look at it."

She handed it to him. Mitch examined it, his lips pursed deprecatingly to conceal his excitement. Its finish was dull, greenish with age. Each of the four grime-obscured handles was formed in the shape of a different figure, a mermaid, a knight and so on. The under-rim was a metallic circle of lace—filigree—as exquisite as it was intricate.

"Kind of cute, isn't it?" the girl said. "I was trying to remember where I got the thing."

"Yes," Mitch murmured. "It is kind of cute."

He hefted it casually, deciding that it was undoubtedly gold. Of course, lead or some other base metal would weigh heavily, too. But it seemed unlikely that any metal but gold would have received so much careful workmanship.

It just wasn't done, Krug had explained to him. Diamonds were not mounted in tin. Expert craftsmen did not spend their valuable time on the intrinsically cheap.

He looked up suddenly. There was a peculiar expression on the girl's face, something that seemed strangely close to amusement. It disappeared immediately, so swiftly that he was not sure he had seen it. He decided that he hadn't, that it was only his guilty imagination, and the tension drained out of his body.

"Well," she said. "Is it worth anything, Mr. Allison?"

"Well," Mitch said. "It's not completely worthless."

"I see."

"There's a little silver in it. Just plate, you know, but it is worth *something.*"

"Yes?"

"Well," Mitch squirmed inwardly. Was she wise? Was she just leading him on, building up to a horse-laugh? "Well, I have to make a little profit. Not much, only fifty cents or so, or maybe a dollar."

"Yes?"

"I can offer you two dollars for it," Mitch said.

The girl choked, and burst into laughter.

Mitch's eyes flashed venomously. He got a firm grip on the cup, and pushed himself up from the chair. One of his hands balled into a fist.

"Please," Peggy Turner gasped. "Please forgive me, but—"

"Sure," said Mitch grimly. "Sure, I'll forgive you."

"You poor innocent, you! You poor helpless thing! Of course I won't sell you that cup!"

"Of course you won't," Mitch

said, and drew a bead on her chin.

He'd slugged plenty of dames for less reason. Socking this one would be both pleasurable and profitable. By the time she stopped listening to the birdies he'd have the cup to Krug, and be miles away.

"I wouldn't think of taking your money," she said. "I'll give you the cup."

She wrapped it in a paper bag to carry.

As he started down the street toward town, he thought he heard another burst of half-hysterical laughter. But a train was passing just then so he wasn't sure. It wasn't something to be bothered about, anyway. She was just a nut —one of those babes who laughed instead of crying. Now that he had the cup, she could laugh her pretty red head off for all he cared.

2.

Coming out of the public library, Mitch knew a moment of regret for his lack of a formal education. He hadn't known where to look for the information he wanted. He didn't know the names of any of the old geezers, silversmiths and gold workers, whose craftsmanship the cup might be. He could have asked the librarian for guidance but he guessed that wouldn't have helped him much. If this thing was as rare as he hoped, there would be no picture of it. If there was a picture, it would certainly not be labeled with a price tag. And without price tags, Mitch Allison was lost.

He knew when something was valuable; a hustler was born knowing. He could not, however, say how valuable it was nor why it was valuable at all.

Under the circumstances, Doc Krug would probably give him a rooking. Or try to. But there was little to be done about it. About all he could do was hold the rooking down to a minimum, to drive the best bargain which his ignorance of values would permit.

Doc's shop was on a side street in the outer edge of the business district. The sign on the door read: KRUG—ANTIQUES. *Dealer in Precious Metals*. A display of old coins and ancient silverware gleamed dully behind the dusty windows. Inside were two long rows of showcases, divided by a narrow aisle, extending to the grilled workroom-office at the rear.

Doc was a short, fat little man. His bald hard-looking head looked like it had been put on with an ice cream dipper. As Mitch came in, he dropped the loupe from his eye and dimmed the brilliant light of his work lamp.

Ignoring Mitch's greeting, he opened the wicket and held out his hand.

"There was a wrist watch on my

workbench this morning," he said. "After you left, it was no longer there. You will return it, please."

"Why not?" Mitch handed it back to him with a shrug. "It's not worth a five-spot."

"So." Doc nodded. "Otherwise, you would not have stolen it. Only the cheap, the shoddy, do you have an eye for. Apparently, you are traveling under false colors. Apparently, there is another Mitch Allison—a truly fast boy, not a clown who could not hustle a dime at a world's fair—and you have taken his name."

He shook his head contemptuously.

Mitch reddened. "Look who's talking," he sneered. "If you're sharp, then I'll shave with a wet noodle! How the hell the word ever got around Los Angeles that you were the guy for a hustler to come to—"

"A real hustler. A boy who recognizes opportunities, such as I have wasted upon you. You yourself know many such men. None of them, I believe, has ever accused me of a lack of sharpness."

Mitch had to admit it, but he did so silently. How Doc had got his reputation he didn't know, but all the fast boys spoke highly of him.

"I send you to a good neighborhood," Doc continued, "and you do nothing. I send you to a poor neighborhood, a place where all of my former associates have done well, and still you do nothing. You lack nerve, presence, intelligence. You expect to swindle a pro, yet you cannot cheat a housewife."

"I can't, huh?" Mitch's face was scarlet. "What do you think I've got in this sack?"

"Bananas?" Doc guessed. "Have you raided a fruit-stand, you oh-so-daring young man?"

Mitch ripped the sack from the cup. He set it in the window of the wicket, forcing himself to calm down, realizing that Doc was angering him deliberately.

Had he glimpsed the cup over the top of the sack? Had its outline against the paper hinted of its value? Mitch thought, yes—hence Doc's attempt to upset him. But there was nothing to bolster the hunch in the fat man's expression.

"I apologize," Doc said. "It was a trash pile you raided, not a fruit store."

Mitch shrugged carelessly, and reached for the cup. "I'll just take it along with me," he said. "Save you the trouble of throwing it away."

"Wait."

Mitch grinned.

"I—I did not say it was worthless. Taking a second look at it, I can see that it contains silver. Almost—well, two or three dollars' worth."

"How much?" Mitch cupped a hand to his ear. "I don't hear so well, Doc?"

"Five dollars. Well, ten then. Little silver it has, but the design is

nice, indeed quite interesting."

"Little silver it has," Mitch nodded mockingly. "But gold, Doc, of gold it has much. A good half-pound I'd say of about eighteen karat."

"Nonsense! It is no better than a thick silver-plate. Perhaps only a fill."

"Well, let's see," Mitch said; his hand reached for a rubber-corked bottle. "Let's just—"

"Imbecile!" Doc jerked the bottle out of reach, his face turning white. "Fool! Better you should have acid on your head than on this—this—"

His voice died foolishly. His eyes wavered under Mitch's knowing gaze, and he heaved a sigh of surrender. "All right," he said. "Beneath this shamefully tarnished exterior, is a very good grade of gold."

"Go on."

"It is antique, very old. Truly a work of art. In all my years in the business, I have seen nothing quite so fine."

"It kind of got me, too," Mitch confessed, a little wonderingly. "But go on, Doc. The business."

Doc Krug spread his fat hands. "I will tell you the truth, Mitch. An object such as this is above price. It is as valuable as one's sense of beauty is great. I might say it was worth fifteen hundred dollars. Or two thousand. Or even twenty-five hundred. And I would be correct in each case. Do you follow me? If one can wait and look long enough, find exactly the right buyer . . ."

"I can't," said Mitch. "Make me an offer."

"One thousand dollars."

Mitch concealed a start. It was a much better deal than he had hoped for. Gratified as he was, however, he automatically refused. "Come on, Doc. You can do better than that."

"No. I am not absolutely positive that I can resell it for even a thousand. Because it is a work of great beauty, I am willing to gamble. But a thousand is my limit."

"All right," Mitch said. "I guess I'll just keep it then. Try for a deal some place else."

"You are wise to do so," Doc nodded. "Yes, and I would even prefer that you do it. I am not a gambling man. For me to have a thousand dollars tied up indefinitely, perhaps for years—"

"It's a deal for a grand," Mitch said hastily.

Krug gave him a thousand dollars, twenty crisp fifties. Mitch turned over his buy-slip on the cup, a receipt signed by Peggy Turner and transferring title to the cup for "one dollar and other valuable considerations."

"And now," Doc said, "I assume that this will end our association. You will be leaving town."

"The first thing in the morning," Mitch agreed. "All I came here for was a stake. Now that I've got it,

I'm lighting out of here, fast."

"It is well. As your best friend of the moment may I make a suggestion? Get into some very simple occupation—something akin, say, to stealing from blind men or robbing very small newsboys. For anything better, you lack the mentality."

Mitch thanked him politely. Then he made a suggestion, a completely impossible one involving various parts of Doc's anatomy.

"Scum!" Doc hissed. "Hoodlum! Stupid oaf! So easily I cheated you on the cup. Why, in time, I will resell it for—"

"In time," Mitch nodded, "and maybe. It's starting to stick in your craw already, isn't it? Well, goodbye, you fat, bald-headed old . . ." He loosed a hair-curling string of epithets at Krug. Then, he left.

And Doc Krug looked after him, not angrily but pleased, a wolfish smile on his face.

3.

Mitch Allison was as lowdown as they come, but his front was strictly high-class. He was capable of courtly manners and language. He ate, drank and wore nothing but the best. So, while he was staying at a second-rate hotel—a place where the guests' backgrounds and misdoings were discreetly ignored—he occupied a parlor suite. He was in the parlor, now, on the evening of his sale of the cup.

He had eaten elegantly, as the plates on the linen-clothed table testified. In a bucket at the side of his chair, there was a large bottle of imported champagne, and in his hand a crystal goblet of the sparkling liquid. He studied it fondly, marveling at the suddenness with which his luck had turned from god-awful to grand.

A week ago he had had nothing, as next-to-nothing as a hustler can have and keep going. Now he had a thousand bucks, or call it nine hundred after he squared with the hotel. Almost two hundred dollars for each day he'd put in with Doc Krug.

Not bad, he mused comfortably. Not bad for a guy with no education, no family; nothing but a head on his shoulders, and the guts to kick back twice as hard as he got kicked!

He could take a stateroom all the way to New York, and still arrive there with a very tidy sum. It wouldn't be as much as he'd like to have, enough to really live it up while he was trying to latch onto something. But—

Mitch Allison frowned thoughtfully. Perhaps he should make another last whirl at Los Angeles. It had seemed wise, a week ago, to get out and stay out of L.A. With three people threatening to kill him—his wife, Bette, among them—it had seemed very wise. But his

nerves had been a little bad at the time, so maybe he'd considered too hastily.

After all, people had been threatening to kill him for years, without, obviously, carrying the project through. And the sucker you'd trimmed was always the best sucker to trim again. He'd be wanting to get even with you. He'd think that he was wise to all your tricks, and that he would take you this time.

So? Los Angeles or New York? Or, rather, Los Angeles then New York, instead of New York period.

Mitch turned the matter over in his mind. . . . There was a soft knock on the bedroom door. He didn't answer it, naturally. He knew no one in San Diego but Doc, and Doc most certainly would not be paying him a call.

Picking up the phone, he spoke softly to the room clerk. The clerk's reply was similarly soft. "None of the employees, Mr. Allison. Someone must have slipped past me. Want the house dick?"

"No, I'll handle it," Mitch decided.

He replaced the receiver, came lithely to his feet. He tiptoed out of the parlor and into the bedroom, listened unbreathing at the door.

There was another knock. Mitch frowned, hesitating, and then he grinned. Entering the bathroom, he turned the shower on full blast. He let out a brief, muted bellow, as of a man singing in his bath; then cautiously, noiselessly, he unlocked the bedroom door and returned to the parlor.

If things worked out as he expected them to . . .

They did work out that way, after a few more knocks. The bedroom door opened slowly. It closed again softly. And there in his room, looking frightened but angry and determined, stood the red-haired girl, Peggy Turner.

Mitch scowled. Only Doc knew his address. Had Doc sicked her on him, told her she'd been cheated, just to make trouble for him?

Well, he'd have to do something nice for Doc, too. Yes, he'd do something very nice for him. Meanwhile, first things first.

Mitch took a roll of adhesive tape from his pocket; a very handy item, he'd found, and nothing that the cops could kick about in case you were searched. He ripped off a piece of it, laid it flat in his palm and moved back softly into the bedroom.

The girl was at the baggage rack, rummaging through his suitcase. As she straightened, Mitch's hand swooped in front of her face, slapping the tape across her mouth.

She gasped and kicked backward. Mitch bumped her head against the wall, jerked and whirled her, and sent her sprawling on the bed. Before she could rise, he was on it with her. Hold-

ing her against him, his arms locked around hers.

"Now, listen," he said, his mouth almost against her face. "You want to play rough, I'll do it, but it's my game, baby, and you won't like the way it turns out. So what do you want to do? Play nice—behave yourself—or go out of here without your front teeth?"

Blue eyes blazed at him helplessly. Her throat rippled with the effort to speak.

"You'll behave?" Mitch said. "Just nod for yes."

She hesitated. Then, all the anger went out of her eyes, and tears filled them; she nodded, sobbing.

Mitch took the tape from her mouth. He was all set for a scream or a struggle, but neither came. All the fight had left her, apparently, for she stayed where she was, weeping as helplessly as a baby.

Her body trembled against his as she wept. Trembled in an extremely pleasant way. Mitch gave her a few experimental pats, he stroked her and was met with only token resistance.

"You s-stop that"—but she didn't move away. In fact, she seemed to cuddle a little closer. "First you ch-cheat me, and then y-you—"

"Now, now," Mitch said. "I didn't like it either, baby. It was just business, you know, nothing personal."

"I was sorry for you! I l-lost my job last night and I'm almost broke, but I felt s-so sorry for you that—"

Mitch clicked his tongue remorsefully. He murmured that he was terribly, terribly ashamed of himself, and that he was going to start right now to turn over a new leaf.

"Y-you—you mean"—she shifted her red head, stared hopefully into his eyes. "You mean you'll—"

"That's just what I mean, honey. We'll split the take right down the middle. Half for you, half for me."

"Ooooh!" she kissed him wildly. "You darling, *darling!* You know what I'm going to do for you?"

"Let me guess," said Mitch, and he increased his patting.

Needless to say, he wasn't going to split Doc's grand with her. The only dough she'd get out of him would be her cab-fare, and she wouldn't get that until morning.

"You're so sweet to me, I'm going to be sweet to you. I'll give you half of the eight thousand *I* get from Doctor Krug."

"Fine. Swell. You'll give . . ." Mitch stared at her.

"Something wrong, darling?"

"N-nothing." Mitch fought to control his voice. "So Doc told you he'd paid me eight grand for the cup?"

"Uh-huh. Well, no, he didn't either, exactly. He came out to the house to see if I had another cup. A chalice he called it, a Cellini chalice, like the one I gave you.

And he said if I did have, he'd give me eight thousand dollars for it."

"So?"

"Well, I didn't like him a bit. I mean, I'm an awfully good judge of character—everyone says so. And I knew that was one man I'd certainly have to watch my step with. He was so sneaky looking, so kind of oily and—"

Mitch suppressed a groan of impatience. "You're absolutely right about him, sweetheart. He's a stinker in spades. But what about the eight thousand you're going to get from him?"

"The eight thousand?"

"Yes!"

"For another chalice?"

"God!" Mitch groaned. "Holy God!"

"Now, look," the girl twitched. "You don't need to be so cross about it!"

"Cross? You mean you thought I was cursing?" Mitch laughed hollowly. "Why, I was praying, my pet!"

"Oh, how sweet! Do you always pray at this time?"

"Always," Mitch sighed. "Always and always. Now, please, baby! Take it from the beginning and . . ."

Gradually, he got the story out of her.

Distrustful of Doc Krug, she'd told him that she didn't have another chalice at the house, but that she thought she had one stored away in an old trunk. It was in a warehouse, she'd said, and she couldn't get into it before morning. Actually, it was in a bar—it belonged to the owner—down near the railroad station, where she, or rather a boy friend she was with at the time, had bought the first one. They'd been just a teensy-bit tipsy that night and the boy friend had thought it would be a swell thing to drink beer out of. So he'd bought it from the proprietor for two dollars.

"An awful old grouch," the girl added. "I mean, he didn't act that way the first time, but he was just as mean as he could be tonight. Why, he wasn't using it at all. It was just sitting up there with a lot of old receipts and things stuffed into it. But when I offered to buy it from him—and I wasn't snippy at all, Mitch; I most certainly wasn't trying to throw my weight around like he said I was . . ."

But anxiety had probably made it seem that she was, Mitch guessed. And apparently the proprietor was one of those stubborn, independent birds. At any rate, he'd told her that if she wanted the cup it would damn well cost her. Either she laid a hundred bucks on the line, or he'd keep it himself.

"And you didn't have the money, so you came to me," Mitch finished. "Where did you say this place was, honey?"

"Just about three blocks from here." She gave him the address. "Could I have my four thousand dollars, honey? I'll go and get the cup, then, and—"

"Certainly, you can have it," Mitch said. "Just as soon as I run out and get some change. It's all in—in big bills. A five-thousand and a three-thousand. I—uh—"

"Three-thousand?" the girl frowned. "I didn't know they made three-thousand-dollar bills."

"They just started," Mitch assured her. "I'll be right back, honey. Right back." He literally ran out of the room. He left the hotel on the double, gradually slowing to a thoughtful walk. Take it easy, he cautioned himself. Maybe she misunderstood Doc. Maybe he lied to her deliberately, to get her good and burned with me.

Turning in at a newsstand, he phoned Krug—at his house since the shop would be closed at this hour. Doc snickered at the sound of his voice. "You have had a nice visitor, yes? When do the doctors think you will recover?"

"She was very nice," Mitch told him. "Nice enough to tell me where I could pick up the duplicate of that Cellini chalice I sold you."

"Please do so. It will confirm my opinions as to your stupidity."

Mitch was silent. Doc laughed with a trace of nervousness.

"I think I have punished you enough, Mitch. Save your much-needed money for traveling expenses. There is no duplicate of the chalice."

"There isn't, huh?" Mitch said. "Well, well."

"Indeed, there isn't, Mitch! If she knows of a similar one, it is certain to be a fake. It would be worthless. It—uh— Of course, if it is a very good fake I might pay a little for it. I would be very happy to examine it, and—"

"You're showing your seams, Doc." Mitch laughed shortly. "Now, lay it on the line and do it fast. That chalice will cost you exactly ten thousand dollars. Do you want it or not?"

"Ten thousand!" Doc squealed like a stuck pig. "But it is a fake, an imitation! It cannot be otherwise. I—"

"Yes or no?"

He heard Doc gulp. "All right, Mitch," Doc said in an agonized whisper. "When . . . ?"

"I'll get in touch," Mitch said, and he banged up the receiver.

He arrived at the block the bar was in, crossed the street, and studied it from the other side. It was a wine-and-beer joint, rather than a regular bar. Its four stools and one small booth were empty. The proprietor, a beefy square-faced guy, was lounging behind the counter reading a newspaper.

Mitch crossed the street, and entered. Taking the front stool, he laid a coin on the counter and ordered a beer. He sipped, and his

eyes moved to the top shelf of a tiered what-not.

It was there, a cup with four figured handles. It wasn't quite so dingy, perhaps, but it was unmistakably the twin of the other chalice. No fake, no imitation. Even from several feet away, Mitch knew it was genuine. Unerring instinct told him it was, whispered that here was money—*big money*—as it had when he saw the first cup.

He caught the proprietor's eye, nodded.

"That cup," he said. "My wife likes it. I don't like my wife."

"You got company." The man looked at him stolidly. "How much don't you like her?"

"A hundred dollars worth."

"A hundred dollars. And you ain't in no big hurry? You don't want to give me the rush act?"

"I wouldn't think of it," said Mitch.

"Well, all right. People come here thinking I'm gonna jump every time they holler frog . . ." The grumbling words trailed away, as he turned and reached down the cup. He laid it on the back bar, and began wrapping it in an old newspaper.

Mitch grimaced wryly. It was no wonder the guy was running a dump like this. With his temperament, he was lucky to have any kind of business.

The man turned around again, and set the cup on the counter. Mitch took the wallet from his hip pocket.

It was empty.

4.

The proprietor stared at Mitch, a stubborn frown wrinkling his forehead. Mitch went on talking, the words issuing from his mouth in a suave and steady stream. He was very convincing; the ability to be convincing was his stock in trade. Slowly, the proprietor softened up.

"All right," he said, at last, "we'll start all over. You were lying about the dame. You don't like her maybe, but you're really after the cup. And you want it because it's worth heavy sugar to you."

"Well. I wouldn't put it that way exactly."

"Put it this way, then. What do I get out of it, and when do I get it?"

"In twenty-four hours. Just give me twenty-four hours."

"How much in twenty-four hours? And don't give me no stuff about a hundred dollars. The price has gone up."

"Well . . ." Mitch hesitated.

The girl had that grand she'd nicked him for. Since she didn't trust Doc, the grand was all she could offer this guy. So if he was promised eleven hundred or maybe twelve to cinch things . . .

But! Would the girl have picked his pocket if she intended to hang around? It didn't seem likely. She'd have to be a lot dumber than she acted to come near this place. She didn't know anything about antiques; she was scared and distrustful. So she'd taken him for his roll, thinking she was getting four grand instead of one, and now . . .

Still, maybe not. He couldn't be sure, and this was no time to take chances.

"Well?" the proprietor frowned. "What d'ya say, Mac?"

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Mitch said. "Whatever you're offered for the cup I'll give you two hundred dollars more."

"What the hell does that mean? Suppose I ain't offered anything?"

"Then," said Mitch smoothly. "You get two hundred dollars. Fair enough?"

The man frowned uncertainly. He scratched his head, a doubtful look coming into his eyes. "Yeah, I guess so," he admitted. "Two hundred bucks on top of anything, from zero on up. Yeah, that sounds okay."

He gave Mitch a look of surly approval. He said he liked a guy that shot square and didn't rush him, and that he'd hold the cup for twenty-four hours.

Mitch thanked him warmly, shook hands and left.

He didn't go back to the hotel, naturally. The redhead wouldn't be there; he had no funds to pay his bill. He entered a pawnshop, emerged minus his topcoat and wristwatch and caught a cab to the airport. A little more than an hour later he got out of another cab on Los Angeles' Spring Street, and started up the steps to his wife's apartment.

It was above a store building in a rundown neighborhood. Bette made good dough as a burlesque strip-teaser but she was always a tight gal with a dollar, and marriage to Mitch hadn't loosened her up any.

There was a double lock on the door. Two locks, instead of the customary one, and both of them were new. He went to work on them, picked them almost as readily as he had picked all the others and went inside.

It was only a few minutes after ten. Bette wouldn't be home before midnight. Mitch got busy again, searching every nook and cranny of the apartment, searching all the old hiding places and every possible new one. He wound up empty-handed.

There wasn't a dollar in cash in the joint. There wasn't a thing that was hockable for more than a few bucks.

Mitch put back everything as he had found it. He left, not at all dejected, already planning his more subtle return. Meanwhile, there was another prospect on his list, a proven sucker who, un-

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friendly as he might be, was also loaded.

The guy's name was Duke English. A pretentious thug with a phony way of talking, he ran a night club a few blocks from Bette's apartment.

Mitch strolled into the place. A muscle-bound bouncer called The Ape escorted him back to Duke's office. He was very firm about it.

This visit was probably a mistake, Mitch decided. Duke was still as murderously sore at him as he had been a week ago. The Ape knee-booted him into the Duke's office. English greeted him warmly, and Mitch's hunch that he had erred became a conviction.

That was the Duke's way. The sorer he was the more friendly he acted. "Sweetheart!" he said. "Mitch, darling! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Look, Duke," Mitch stammered. "I'm sorry about that little frammis on the booze, and I've come to make it up to you. I've got a—"

"A surprise?" Duke clapped his hands. "I'll bet it's money, isn't it? You've come to give me some money!"

"No—yes, that's right," Mitch said hastily. "You put in eleven or twelve hundred with me, well, two grand at the outside, and—"

"Money!" Duke interrupted him gaily. "Oh, goody! Ape, lover, our friend is being coy. Will you give him a little assistance?"

The Ape frisked Mitch. He did a very thorough job of it. Duke pouted over the result, then leered and fluttered his eyelids modestly. "Will you put your clothes back on, dear? I do blush so easily!"

Mitch re-dressed, keeping a wary eye on him. Despite Duke's talk, his appearance was anything but feminine. He was small, with the same wiry build and hard, big hands of a jockey. Without his shoulder-holstered gun, Mitch knew he was a match for practically any tough customer who patronized his place. He could joke while kicking a man's teeth out.

"No money," he said. "Dear, dear. But you spoke about letting me in on something juicy?"

"That's right! Duke if you can bank me for a two-grand max, I'll guarantee—"

"It wouldn't involve whiskey, would it? I do hope not!"

"On the level, Duke. I swear it!"

"Proceed," the Duke said. "And would you mind, darling? I'll decide whether it's on the level."

Mitch gave him the story, holding out enough details to prevent Duke's taking over the deal himself. He finished and Duke frowned thoughtfully, and reached for the telephone.

"Long distance," he said. "I'd like to speak to San Diego, the residence of—"

"Wait!" Mitch broke in. "Doc will lie to you, Duke. He'll tell you that—"

"Shaddup!" the Ape said.

Mitch shut up. The Ape had tapped him across the Adam's apple. Duke spoke to Doc, listened and hung up the receiver. He grinned at Mitch.

"Naughty, naughty! Oh, you naughty boy!"

"Listen!" Mitch begged. "That cup is the McCoy, the real thing! Doc lied to you because—"

"You're excited," the Duke said, solicitously. "You need a drink. Ape, darling, will you get a bottle out of the liquor cabinet?"

"The Scotch?"

"But, of course! Some of that rare old Scotch that our dear friend sold me at a bargain rate."

The Ape took a full quart from the cabinet. He opened it, and thrust it into Mitch's nerveless hands. Mitch stared at it horrified, for naturally it did not contain Scotch or any other kind of whiskey. What it contained was radiator fluid and tobacco juice.

"Drink up!" Duke beamed. "I'll be terribly offended if you don't."

"Listen, Duke. I—"

"You better drink, dear!"

Mitch took a sip of the stuff. He gasped, choked and his stomach did flip-flops.

"Delicious, isn't it?" the Duke said. "Have another."

"I c-cuh-can't!" Mitch strangled. "I—I—"

"You don't like it? Oh, dear! Ape, why do you suppose the darling doesn't like our Scotch?"

"He's just pretendin'," the Ape said. "He loves it."

"Oh?"

"Uh-huh. Kinda bashful, you know. His mama told him he should never take seconds."

"Why, the shy sweet child! Well, if he won't accept our hospitality, we'll simply have to—"

Mitch made a wild lunge from his chair. The Ape collared him, and slammed him down into it again. He put a ham-like hand over the upper part of Mitch's face. His mouth was forced open, and . . .

It wasn't as bad as he expected. Rather, they didn't give him the full treatment he had expected. After a couple of swallows, the Ape kicked him out into the alley, the kick prompting Mitch's stomach to expel the stuff. He picked himself up, neither seriously sick nor injured, and went down the alley to the street.

He cleaned up in a restaurant washroom. Then, with three glasses of milk soothing his innards, he returned to his wife's apartment.

Light gleamed under the door. He could hear her stirring about inside. Rapping on the door, he called softly, "It's Mitch, honey."

There was dead silence for a moment. A very long moment. Then, there was a *click* followed shortly by another *click* as she keyed the two locks.

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Mitch gripped the doorknob. He turned it, simultaneously throwing his weight against the door.

Bette had been waiting behind it. Now, half-stunned—crushed between the wall and the door—she surrendered the section of lead pipe with which she had meant to slug him. Mitch tossed it into a corner.

He released her, then, guided her stumbling to a chair despite her profane protests.

She was a nice armful of woman, this Bette. Small but busty; slender but lusciously curved. Mitch could never look at her—particularly in a nightgown as she was now—without getting steamed up. Unfortunately, he was also unable to look at her for long without playing her for a chump. But that was her own fault, he told himself virtuously. When a dame was so easy to outguess, when she just wouldn't smarten up, what was a hustling man to do?

The dazed look went out of her eyes. She addressed her husband with a kind of surly joy. "Well, go ahead, you lowdown louse. Go on and frisk the joint! Take everything you can find."

"I just came to say good-bye," Mitch said quietly. "I only wish there was some way to make up for all the wrong I've done you."

"Nuts! I know what you came for."

"I don't blame you for feeling that way," Mitch said. "Good-bye, my sweet. I want you to know that I'll never love another woman."

He planted a chaste kiss on her forehead, swiftly to avoid a punch. Sadly, shoulders sagging, he started for the door. Bette looked at him with worried puzzlement, wondering what the gimmick was this time. Wondering if maybe . . .

He was one hell of a handsome guy. And gosh, he could be a lot of fun.

"Mitch . . ."

He shook his head, spoke without turning. "No, Bette. I think we'd better leave it at good-bye. You're too good for me. I want you to know that I'd never wrong you again, but—"

Gosh, he *must* have changed. If not, why hadn't he robbed her again tonight? Of course, he wouldn't have got anything, but he didn't know that. "Mitch!" she wailed. "Don't go, honey!"

Mitch allowed himself to be persuaded. He went back, and Bette sat on his lap.

He softened her up good. Then, to use a con-man's expression, he told her the tale. Not about the chalice; that was too involved. This one concerned a certain Mame Dorset, madam of a parlor house.

Immediately, Bette's suspicions flared up again.

"No, by gosh! My dough's in the bank, and that's right where it's staying."

"All right." Mitch didn't argue with her. "I only wanted the money for you. I'd just as soon forget it myself."

"I won't touch a penny of that money! All the times you've gypped me—"

"I know. So let's drop the subject. After all, what's fifteen hundred dollars? You can draw that much salary in eight or ten weeks."

"Well"—Bette bit her lip. "It's certainly a nice piece of change, Mitch . . ."

"I understand," Mitch said, "It's dishonest. It's very bad of me to think about clipping poor Mame."

"N-no. I don't mind your clipping *other* people, Mitch. After all, a man has to do *something*, and you're very good at it. If you'd just let me handle the dough you made instead of—"

"That's what I was going to do," said Mitch. "But as long as you're not interested . . ."

He seemed prepared, practically determined, to drop the subject. Bette gnawed her lip some more, trying to peer inside her husband's larcenous mind, seeking for the trap which might be awaiting her.

"Let me get one thing straight, honey. How do you know you can turn Mame's furniture for fifteen hundred?"

"She's been offered that much. She's been considering selling it for that."

"Yes, but that's legit. How do you know that you can—"

Mitch explained. The old-fashioned mahogany furniture in Mame's parlor was well-known to the underworld. It had been appraised and listed by the thieves' market at fifteen hundred. And the dough was ready and waiting for the guy who could get it away from her.

"Just like that?" Bette frowned. "Mame can't do anything about it?"

"Like screaming to the cops? A madam yelling copper?" Mitch shrugged. "I guess she could sue me if she wanted to."

Bette giggled. "You say the funniest things, honey! Now one other thing, the big thing. I draw the dough out of my bank and give it to you, but I stick with you *all* the time. You don't get out of my sight for a moment. That's right, isn't it? I mean, I hate to sound suspicious, but—"

"That's the pitch," Mitch nodded firmly. "I deposit the money in another bank, but you'll be waiting right outside the door. And when I come out, I give you my passbook."

"Well . . ." Bette hesitated briefly. "It certainly sounds all right, honey. I have the passbook. I'll have a check for twenty-five hundred made out in the name of Mame Dorset."

Her voice trailed away. She frowned again, but not with suspicion. She looked at Mitch curi-

ously, somehow seeming to look at herself at the same time.

"Mitch," she said, "what's the matter with us? Why do you do these things, and why do I want you to?"

"Come again?"

"Don't you see, honey? It takes brains to think up a deal like this. I'll bet there's presidents of big companies who couldn't do it. So why, if you're that smart—why be a crook? I mean, you could make it easier and bigger on the legit."

Mitch shrugged. The noncommital gesture, seemingly no answer, spoke volumes. This was his element; he had been born to it and he had always lived in it. And he was incapable of visualizing any other way of making a livelihood.

Why was he a crook? Well, why does a shark live in the water? It was that simple, and complex.

The matter slid in and out of Bette's mind; that's the way Bette's mind worked. Her face cleared, and she kissed him lovingly. "I'll need some identification, won't I, Mitch? Something to show I'm Mame?"

"Take out another social security card." He returned the kiss. "Yeah, and maybe you'd better buy a dog license."

"Mmmm . . ." She wriggled against him luxuriously. "Kinda tired, honey. Mommy's kind of tired . . ."

5.

The following morning he opened a bank account with Bette's money while she waited watchfully outside. He gave her the passbook and a check made out to Mame Dorset, and then they separated. She was to cash the check, closing out the account, at a quarter-of-three. Which meant, although she hadn't thought of it, that she would not have time to re-deposit the money in her own bank.

Of course, she could buy a cashier's check with the dough. But Mitch was sure she wouldn't. The kid was a born chump, and she'd never be anything else.

He called on a "right" furniture dealer, arranging for the purchase and transportation of Mame's stuff. While he was there, he got the name of a "good" dealer in art objects, just in case Doc Krug should get contrary.

He had a couple of drinks and a good lunch. At about one-thirty in the afternoon, he rapped on the door of Mame Dorset's house. It was very quiet; at this time of day, the girls would still be asleep. Mitch was starting to knock again when the door opened a few inches, and Mame's maid peered out at him.

"Mister Mitch!" A frightened gasp. "Go 'way from here! Miss Mame's just naturally going to kill you and me both if—"

AD HITCCOCHCOCSTERY MAGRY ME

"Then we'll have a double funeral," Mitch said easily, and he shoved his way past her. "How about it, Rosie? Like to be buried with me?"

The maid blanched. She made a grab for him as he started for the stairs. "Please, Mister Mitch! Puh-lease go 'way! Miss Mame just waked up, and she's taking a bath an'—"

"And about time, too," Mitch said. "I'll give her a hand." He shook off Rosie's restraining hands. As she watched in helpless terror, Mitch mounted the stairs and entered Mame's bedroom.

Mame saw him through the open door of the bath. With a wild yell, she grabbed up a scrubbing brush and hurled it at him. Mitch ducked it. Mame lunged up out of the tub, oblivious to its soapy treacherousness. And feet skidding, letting out another wild yell, she went under with a tremendous splash.

She came up again, spewing soapsuds, her peroxided hair a mop-like mess. Mitch handed her a towel, gravely remarking that she seemed upset. "You act like you're sore at me, Mame. What's it all about?"

"What's it about!" Miss Dorset shrieked. "You dirty son of a— You plant a cop on me, and then you got the nerve to ask me what it's all about!"

"Cop? *I* planted a cop on you!" Mitch appeared horror-struck. "Surely that lovely young creature I brought here wasn't a cop!"

"You're damned right she was, and don't tell me you didn't know it!"

"Now, Mame. Why in the world would I—"

"You think I don't know? To rob me, that's why! You were going to come in after the raid, and strip the joint. And the only reason you didn't was because Duke English was gunning for you!"

"Why, Mame, dear!" Mitch shook his head sadly. "You can't believe I'd do a thing like that! Why, what kind of a man would I be to—"

"The kind you are!" Mame shrieked. "Sure, you'd do it! There ain't a damned, lousy rotten thing in the world that you wouldn't do! I'm going to kill you, Mitch! I'll kill you, by God, if it's my last act on earth! I trusted you, and you, you stinking, lowdown, slimy, double-crossing . . ."

Her eyes rolled in her head. There was froth at the corners of her mouth, and her voice rose, grew wilder and wilder. Then, right at the peak of her curses and threats, when they had reached a blood-curdling crescendo, she gasped, choked, and burst into tears.

Mitch had been waiting for that. As with many another woman, Mame's tantrums invariably ended this way. Swiftly he went into action, beginning his attack while

she was still drained dry emotionally.

Weakly, too breathless to protest, she allowed him to help her out of the tub. He stretched her out on the bed, patted and rubbed her with the towel; talked to her in his smooth, soothing voice.

"You have a beautiful figure, Mame. Lovely. I'd never believe you were a day over thirty-five."

"Oh, y-yeah. Sure. You—you really mean it, Mitch?"

"That girl deceived me, Mame. You know how deceitful these young girls are."

"Well . . ."

"She got me to feeling sorry for her. She wanted to get into the business, she said, so I told her I'd start her off right at the top. I said, 'Look, sister, this Mame Dorset is class with a capital *C*. She's a lady herself, and she'll make one out of you. She'll—' "

"And I would have, too, Mitch! I'd have done it if I had to kick the stuffing out of her. Why, I've taken girls in here, really tough bimbos, and inside of three months . . ."

Mitch nodded sympathetically, choking back a laugh. Mame was undoubtedly the toughest, tightest-fisted battle-axe in the trade. Once a bim got in Mame's clutches, she was up the well-known creek. She never got out of debt. She worked for her board and room, and, of course, the exercise. And if she didn't like it, just let her say so. Mame would give her something that she liked even less.

Mitch glanced at the clock; it was two straight up. He swung into the beginning of his patter.

Mame went for the first part, the groundwork. Smooth operator that he was, it was easy to believe that Mitch had made a connection with a movie studio. Why not, anyway? Why shouldn't he have talked himself into a spot where he could tap the till? He'd suckered everyone else, so why not the movies?

"And that's where you come in Mame. That's how I'm going to put you on the gravy-train special. You see, they're doing this story about a parlor house, an old-fashioned one, you know, and . . ."

He gave her the rest of it. Mame stared at him. She didn't look like she was going to sock him, or even like she wanted to. She just seemed kind of weary, and a little sad.

"Aaah, Mitch, why do you do it? Why did you have to do it?"

"Do what?"

"You just get through hitting me with one swiftie. Then, just when I'm pulling out of it, startin' to like you again, you bang me with another one. Dammit to hell, I don't know why I—"

"Look," said Mitch. "Fifteen hundred is a good price for that junk. I'm giving you twenty-five. You call that pouring you a quick one? Now tell me."

"You're damned right!" Mame nodded emphatically. "Whenever you start writing checks, I start running!"

"Call up the bank," Mitch said. "Get the manager on the phone."

"Nuts!"

"Go on," Mitch said. "I'll talk to him and let you listen."

Mame wavered. She snatched up the phone. "You think I won't, huh? Well, I'll just call your bluff, buddy!"

The manager came on the wire. Mitch took it and spoke to him, holding the receiver slightly away from his ear so that Mame could listen.

"Yes," the man said. "Yes, I remember our conversation this morning. The twenty-five hundred is earmarked for Miss Mamie Dorset. It is to be paid to no one else."

Mame looked bewildered. Then, her eyes narrowed knowingly, and she whispered to Mitch. He nodded and spoke to the manager again.

"One other thing, Mr. Baker. You are not to honor any stop-payment on the check. . . . Will you repeat that, please? Miss Dorset is with me, and I want her to hear you confirm it . . . Thank you, very much, sir."

Mitch hung up the receiver. Mame shook her head incredulously.

"It's on the level," she said, in an awed tone. "You did something that was actually on the level!"

"Yes?" said Mitch with a trace of stiffness. "That's all you have to say to me?"

"Well . . . I guess I owe you an apology, maybe."

He rode back to the store with the moving van. Pocketing fifteen hundred from the furniture dealer, he returned to Bette's apartment.

She was there waiting for him. She had been worried, fearful that he might have got himself jammed up. And when he walked in grinning, obviously safe and successful, she was almost tearfully happy.

He kissed her, and scooped her up in his arms. Smiling down into her face, he walked toward the bed with her.

"How about you, baby? Any trouble at your end?"

"Not a bit, Mitch. That manager was just as nice as he could be."

"Swell. You put the dough back in your own bank?"

"I couldn't, honey. It was too late."

"Was it?" Mitch shifted her in his arms. "And was it too late to buy money orders or a cashier's check?"

"Well, no, I guess not. But those things cost money, you know, and—"

Mitch dropped her suddenly, and she fell to the bed with a little scream. He flipped her over on her stomach, sat down on her and took out his roll of tape.

She didn't struggle much. She

had learned the futility of struggling with him, if she had learned nothing else. Mitch bound her wrists and ankles, stripped tape across her mouth and stood up.

She rolled over. Tear-filled eyes glared at him as he stripped the money from her purse. He looked down at her with a kind of smile-frown, irritated but also apologetic.

"Now, what could you expect, Bette? Honest to God, what else could you expect?"

Bette made no answer, naturally. She closed her eyes, and two great tears squeezed beneath the lids, coursed slowly down her cheeks.

Mitch bit his lip. He turned abruptly, and headed for the door. He opened it, took one last look at her as he stood on the threshold. What the hell? he thought. She'd be all right. She wasn't hurt any; she had a good job; she could work herself free in an hour. She was okay, and he was okay. And yet, somehow, he felt sort of bad.

"Baby . . ." He spoke awkwardly, hoarsely. "I guess it's pretty hard to believe, but I do love you. I really do love you, honey."

"And I," said a voice behind him, "I love you, too, dear."

Mitch jumped, whirled. Duke English beamed at him. Duke was small but the gun with the silencer on it was awful big. "A little game, eh?" He nodded toward the door, smirking. "Can I play? I'll let you be It!"

"Now, look, Duke," Mitch said hastily. "You paid me off for that whiskey deal. We're all square now."

"Why, lover," Duke pouted. "I'm not twitted with you; truly I'm not. I—But hadn't you better close that door? I'm afraid it's making a draft on the little woman."

Mitch closed it slowly, giving his mind time to catch up with the situation. Duke was calling it quits on the whiskey swindle. It must be, then, that he had changed his mind about bankrolling the chalice deal. In that case . . .

He turned around, faced Duke again, laughing inwardly, outwardly sober and worried. "Can you make it fast, Duke? I've got a lot of hustling to do if I'm going to close on that chalice."

"You're still after it, then?" Duke said. "You're still sure it's a sweet item."

"Ten thousand sweet items. A ten-G gross."

"And you couldn't promote the little woman? You haven't raised any of the necessary elsewhere?"

"Well," Mitch hesitated cautiously, "I have and I haven't. I've kind of made a start, you know, and, uh—"

Duke studied him. He beamed, and patted Mitch's cheek. "Well, your troubles are over, dear boy. I shall be your partner, and provide the cash."

"Swell," Mitch said, "that's swell, Duke. Now, I can get a train for

San Diego in about twenty minutes.

"Train?" Duke pouted. "Oh, you don't want to ride those nasty old trains, honey. I'll let you drive my car."

"Huh!" Mitch made a fast recovery. "Well, that'll certainly be a lot better, Duke. I can—"

"And would you mind terribly, darling? You won't mind if I ride along with you?"

6.

Mitch gaped. Laughing gaily, Duke gave him a push toward the stairs. "Move, honey," he said. "You'd better get moving!" Mitch moved.

Duke's big black Cadillac was parked at the curb. Mitch slid under the wheel, and Duke climbed into the back seat. He murmured approval as Mitch cautiously moved the car out into the stream of afternoon traffic. "That's fine, darling. I do get nervous so easily, and when I get nervous . . . Even with a silencer, I just simply loathe the sound of a gun."

The warning was unnecessary. Mitch hadn't the slightest notion of pulling anything. After all, he'd gotten a total of four Gs from Mame and Bette, to which add half the profit, at least, from selling the chalice—another four thousand. That was enough for twenty-four hours of hustling. Enough, at least, to prevent his risking a bullet for a few thousand more.

They left the city, and hit the highway for San Diego. It passed through some of the most beautiful scenery in America, a semi-tropical expanse of orange groves and gleaming white-sand beaches. A salt-sweet breeze swept in from the ocean; air that one wanted to gulp down like champagne. And Mitch settled back in the seat, very relaxed and content, feeling that this world he had been born into was indeed a wonderful place to live.

There was no need, he decided, to feel troubled about Bette. Hell, he'd really been pretty nice to her. Taught her a valuable lesson; relieved her of money which she didn't know how to spend properly and would only worry about. Yes, he'd been very fair and decent to Bette. He wasn't like some guys —this character Duke, for example. Now, there was one for you. Straight out from under the rug. He'd climb a tree to give you trouble when he could stand on the ground and be friends.

Mitch didn't dig the Duke at all. Duke was up to here in the chips; he was so loaded that it was making him stoop-shouldered to carry it around. Still, he went right on grabbing for more, and the nastier he could be about it the better he liked it.

Take that talk of his. That was meant to rub you against the grain.

A kind of defense with him. Uneducated, unable to talk good English, so he made with the dear-dear stuff. It was a cover-up for him. It helped him to get even for the short-changing which he felt the world had given him. That was probably the source of a lot of Duke's nastiness: a feeling of inferiority. But why the hell didn't he get at the source of it? With his dough, he could . . .

Abruptly, for no reason he was aware of, Mitch's thoughts shifted from Duke to his own pleasant prospects. Eight grand. Between eight and nine grand! The first really big dough he'd ever got his hands on. To hell with a mere stateroom! He'd take a two-room suite on the Super Chief. And when he hit New York—brother! The big town would never be the same again. They'd be cleaning up the red-paint for the next century.

It is about one hundred and thirty miles from Los Angeles to San Diego. They got there shortly after dark, and Mitch parked a little below and across the street from the bar. Duke looked at the place, frowning, as they got out of the Cad.

"You can't mean it, dear. A priceless antique is in a flyspecked hole-in-the-wall like *that?*"

"I told you," Mitch shrugged.

"Incredible! And how did yon uncouth creature get it into his possession, dear boy?"

"How do I know? What's the difference as long as he's got it?"

"An interesting question. Pray precede me, sweetheart."

Mitch started across the street, a careful two paces ahead of Duke. He was ever so slightly uneasy as he stepped through the door of the bar; just a little worried by Duke's remarks. Then, his eyes lighted on the what-not behind the cash register, and his uneasiness vanished.

The chalice was there. It was still what his memory had told him it was; invisibly marked with the imprint of capital-d dough, glowing with the strange beauty which the centuries could not and would never dim.

"Made it, huh? The proprietor beamed at Mitch. "That dame, the redhead, said you wouldn't, but I knew better."

He got a piece of newspaper and began wrapping the cup. Mitch watched him, doing a little rapid arithmetic in his head. The girl had a grand in cash. If she'd peddled that junk furniture of hers, put the bite on some of her boy friends, she might have raised as much as . . .

"How much?" he said.

"Well, you know you promised to give me an extra two hundred. Whatever she offered you—"

"I know. How much altogether?"

"Six thousand, two hundred dollars."

"Six thou—!" Mitch let out a gasp. His eyes narrowed to angry slits. "What the hell are you trying to hand me, buster? That babe couldn't have—"

"What do you mean, what am I trying to hand you?" The proprietor bristled. "You calling me a liar?"

"But . . . No, of course not—"

The man snatched up the cup and tossed it under the counter. Chin jutting stubbornly, he gestured toward the door.

"Get outta here! No one calls me a liar!"

"I'm sorry," Mitch apologized. "I didn't mean it like it sounded. I was just surprised, you know, I hadn't counted on . . ."

Dammit, Doc Krug must have got to the babe after all! Only he could have bid the price this high —one so high, he thought, that Mitch couldn't meet it. And even at six grand he was getting a bargain.

"Well, all right," the proprietor grumbled, "as long as you didn't mean it. Just give me sixty-two hundred and we'll get this over with."

Mitch hesitated, shooting an uneasy glance at Duke. This was going to knock hell out of his profit, and it was going to look funny to flash four Gs in front of Duke. Still, he'd either do it or there'd be no deal.

"Yeah, honey?"

Mitch stammered out an explanation. A couple of other guys had given him some backing. He'd kept quiet about it, for fear that Duke would think he was lying and get sore.

"What a dreadful picture you have of me!" Duke said. "I wouldn't think of cutting in on you, honey."

"But—"

"Huh-uh. There's a distinct odor of frammis about this. The old razza-ma-tazz. When I put money into a tin cup it has a blind guy holding it."

"Tin hell!" Mitch yanked out his wallet and slapped all but a few small bills onto the counter. "There's four grand I'm putting up. Would I do that if this wasn't on the level?"

"Not an unremote possibility, honey. The old clincher, you know. Still . . ." Still the dough had impressed him. It was the one thing that invariably impressed Duke, Mitch knew.

The proprietor scowled at Duke with obvious dislike. In about a minute, Mitch guessed, he'd order them both out of the place.

"Come on, Duke," Mitch pleaded. "Play with me on this. You've made the trip. You've got the dough. Don't back out on it now, just when—"

"You better do somethin'," the proprietor cut in with a growl.

Duke looked from him to Mitch. His eyes remained on Mitch as he reached for his wallet.

"Very well," he said, counting from a sheaf of bills. "Oh, but very well, dear. But this hadn't better be what it might be."

The proprietor shoved his money with Mitch's, and gave it a fast recount. He said, "Sixty-two hundred, on the nose," and handed over the cup.

Mitch left the place, still walking in front of Duke. He got behind the wheel again, Duke got back into the rear seat and they headed for Doc Krug's house.

It was near the ocean, a cottage sitting far back from the street and almost hidden by trees and shrubbery. The dense foliage, dank with the night dew, accented the loneliness of the place, gave it a desolate mournful air. As Doc opened the door for them, Mitch felt like he was entering a tomb rather than a house.

They went down a short hallway, and into a living room. Doc sat down at a table, switched on the brilliant overhead lamp and looked leeringly at his two guests.

"So," he said, "you have a chalice by Cellini. The exact duplicate of an item which is known to be unique. It has no authentic duplicate, and yet—"

"But you were damned hot to buy it," Mitch snapped. "You were ready to pop six grand for it."

"Did I, indeed? And when and where did I do that?"

"Come on!" Mitch said. "Stop bluffing and open it up. Look at it and then tell me it's a fake!"

"Please, dear." Duke gave him a deadly grin. "Don't ask him to tell us that. Think how badly I'll feel if he does."

He slid a hand inside his coat. He jerked his head at Doc, and Doc picked up the cup. Slowly, his fat fingers fumbling, he began to unwrap it.

Mitch watched him, almost forgetting to breathe. A fine cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He chewed his lip, angrily asking himself why the nervousness.

The cup was the McCoy, just like the first one had been. He knew it as well as he knew he was alive. He'd known it last night; he'd known it tonight when he saw it for the second time. It had seemed to call to him from its perch on the what-not shelf, whisper the magic word, money, to which his ear was ever attuned. And as he watched, the bar owner had lifted it down from the shelf and—and—

Mitch's heart skidded. His stomach did a slow, sickening flip-flop.

The guy had got sore, just as he finished wrapping it. He'd tossed it out of sight, under the counter, and—And there could have been another cup there! A fake, wrapped in exactly the same way as the real Cellini . . .

Mitch shot a swift glance at Duke. The racketeer was leaning forward a little, all his attention riveted on Doc and the object he

was unwrapping. Mitch measured the distance between them. He edged sidewise cautiously, every muscle tensed, braced for immediate action.

The last wrapping fell from the cup. Mitch didn't need to be told it was a fake. He yelled un-nervingly, swung his stiffened right arm with all his fear-inspired strength. It struck Duke's shoulders like a club, knocking him off balance, pitching him forward across the table.

He bowled into Doc. Doc shot over backwards in his chair and Duke landed on top of him.

Mitch ran; hell, he was already running. There was an ominous *ker-chung* as he hurled himself toward the hall—the sound of Duke's silenced gun. There was another as he clawed open the door, cleared the porch and the steps with one flying leap. Ducking and darting, he fled through the trees toward the street. Racing against the bullets that were certain to follow the first two.

Duke would be on his feet by now. He'd be lunging out the door, plunging through the trees in hot pursuit. He'd never swallow this, the rooking he thought he'd been handed.

Kuh-lunk!

A baseball bat seemed to crash into Mitch's forehead. His racing feet shot from under him, and his body literally soared into the air. He came down flat on his back, all the wind knocked out of him, paralyzed with shock.

He was conscious but he couldn't move. In the dim moonlight, he looked dazedly upward . . . The thick branch of a tree. That was what had hit him, or rather what he had hit. At the rate he'd been moving, it was a wonder that it hadn't knocked his head off. Drearily, he almost wished that it had. Anything was better than to be like this. To lie here helplessly, waiting for a guy to kill you.

What was holding Duke up, anyway? Why the hell didn't he get it over with?

The minutes dragged by. Mitch's head began to clear, and a little breath came back into his body. He rolled his eyes, squinted through the foliage toward the house. He stopped breathing for a moment, straining his ears to listen.

There was nothing to hear. No sound. A guy couldn't move in this timber without at least a little racket, but there wasn't so much as a cracking twig. Obviously, Duke hadn't followed him, wasn't looking for him. It didn't make sense . . .

Didn't it, though!

He'd been conned. Not Duke. Duke had taken him, and blown him off. Given him the hard scare to keep him running. It was the old double-switch, the reverse play. You let the sucker talk you into a deal you'd set up yourself. When

it blew up, you made more than him, and he made for the hills.

Mitch choked back a moan. In the darkness, a shamed flush spread over his face. A chump, no less! He, Mitch Allison, the hustler's hustler, the fastest of the fast boys, had been played for a chump! He pushed himself up, rose to a sitting position. Bitterly, his blood seething to a slow boil, he put questions to his mind, angrily prodding it to answer.

How did Duke know when to close in? . . . Simple, you sap! With his connections, he could tab anyone all over L. A. . . . But how did he know what I was holding? . . . He didn't have to, dammit! The cup's price is put out of your reach. You shell out your dough first, and Duke makes up the difference.

Mitch asked himself one more question, one of several parts. As the answer spewed back at him, he started crawling toward the driveway . . . *Stop being a jerk, you jerk! This is a going concern, not a one-shot. The hustlers go to Doc—a right guy to see. Doc steers them to the girl. From then on it's the old merry-go-round until Duke blows the chumps off.*

Mitch came out of the trees, and onto the driveway. He moved silently toward Duke's car, guessing that the chumps would never talk even if they did wise up. They'd be ashamed to. A deal like this could get them laughed out of their underwear. As for going to the police, that just wasn't done in these circles. You had too much to hide yourself. The law says something about appealing with clean hands, and you—guys like you and Doc and Duke—had to keep your hands in your pockets.

Mitch tested the trunk-lid of Duke's car. It was unlocked. He took out a heavy wrench, lowered the lid again and quietly opened a rear door. He eased it shut, crouched down on the floor, waiting. It would be okay—he'd still have the big difference—even if Duke spotted him there. He had this wrench, and all Duke had was a gun loaded with blanks.

It was some thirty minutes before the door of the house opened. Doc and Duke lingered on the porch for a moment, their laughter, faint snatches of their conversation, drifting out to Mitch.

". . . still running, doubtless . . . A man of long legs, and little brain . . ."

". . . small bonus for Butch, dear? When he returns from his vacation, that is . . ."

". . . agree. And you will give the seven-fifty to Peg . . ."

"Plus my love, darling. Oodles and loads of my love. Sweet Peggy and I have a date . . ."

The door closed. Duke came through the trees to the car. He slid into the front seat and Mitch slugged him over the head.

There was plenty of muscle in

the blow. It chilled Duke like a well-digger's feet. Mitch slugged him again to keep him that way—and because he felt like it—and dragged him over the seat. He threw Duke's gun into the trees, pocketed the roll he was carrying and dropped his body to the floor. He was going to do something really big for Duke, he decided. Something he'd never forget. But he didn't know what it would be at the moment, and there were other matters more pressing.

Mitch got out of the car. He brought his hand down on the horn; then, with the blast echoing through the trees, he raced toward the house.

The door opened. Doc called through the screen. He hesitated, waiting for a reply, and then came out on the porch. "Duke? Is there some trouble with the—?"

Mitch gave him a medium-heavy tap on the noggin. When Doc came to, he was on the floor in the living room, and Mitch was bent over him with upraised wrench.

"P-please"—Doc's eyes rolled in terror. "I have money, Mitch! T-take—"

"I took it," Mitch said grimly. "Yours *and* mine. Where's the chalice?"

"I—I have already sold it! I—"

"Huh-uh. It was in the bar tonight, the genuine Cellini, the only one there is. The one you've shuffled from place to place to suck me in."

"It is in my store! Locked up in the safe."

"We'll see," Mitch said. "You'll go along with me, and if it isn't there I'll show you what'll happen, Doc. I'll give you a sample."

He started the wrench downward viciously. Doc let out a squeal.

"The girl, Mitch! The redhead! She picked it up at the bar, after—"

Mitch gave him a scalp-splitting blow. He'd found out all that he'd needed to, and he'd been itching to lay a good one on Doc.

He stood up and looked around thoughtfully, wondering how best to dispose of the fat man. After a moment's pondering, he strolled through the house and out the back door. It was an old place; a considerable distance from its nearest neighbor. It should have a cesspool. It did.

Mitch pried up its iron cover; a nauseating stench rolled up into his face. He struck a match and dropped it into the pit, getting a glimpse of brownish bubbling slime. He found a long pole—once used apparently as a clothesline prop—measured the over-all depth of the pit, as well as the depth of its contents. Satisfied with his findings, he re-entered the house and took Doc by the heels.

Unconscious, and weighing what he did, Doc was a cumbrous load to drag. But Mitch had his heart in the job. He hauled him down the steps and on out to the cess-

pool. Mitch swung him around, so that his legs dangled into the pit. Then, he got behind him, hoisted mightily and let go.

Doc sank downward slowly, his body scraping against the cement walls. He went down into the slime, sinking until the stuff was almost up to his neck and his feet touched bottom. The cold filth revived him, and eyes rolling with terror he looked up at Mitch.

"N-no, Mitch! N-n-noo! You are not a murderer."

"I'm not," Mitch agreed. "You'll get out, Doc. You can reach the top, almost. All you have to do is—"

"Pl-please! I will die here! I—"

"You can reach the top. Almost," Mitch repeated. "You can jump for it as soon as you thin down your gut. Shouldn't take you more than a day at the outside."

Doc began to curse him. Sliding the iron lid partly over the hole, Mitch walked away laughing. Doc would get out all right, eventually. Guys like him and Duke were too damned ornery to die.

Reaching the car, Mitch found Duke showing signs of reviving. He slugged him again, bound him up with his belt and necktie and drove away.

The bar-owner—the *supposed* bar-owner—now? Mitch hesitated, and shook his head. No telling where the guy was. Anyway, he was strictly small-time, not worth bothering with. To take care of Doc, Duke and the girl would be enough, Mitch.

He was still wondering what to do with Duke as he turned into the shabby dirt street across from the railroad tracks. Cutting the lights and motor, he glided to a stop in front of the girl's house.

The shades were drawn, but light gleamed around their edges. Mitch turned his head, looked musingly at the railroad right-of-way. Should he dump Duke there in the weeds? Strip his clothes off and dump him? Not good enough. It lacked finesse, and he would be discovered too soon. What, then?

There was a throaty whistle in the distance; a muted grinding and chugging. Then, the beam of a headlight sliding across the windshield, as a train steamed slowly out of the San Diego freight yards. Mitch scrambled out of the car. Scooping Duke up in his arms, he trotted toward the right-of-way.

He dumped him down in the weeds, ripped the clothes from his body. As the locomotive steamed past, he picked him up again and moved up to track-side. He waited there a moment, eyes straining in the darkness. Suddenly, he raised up on his toes, pitched upward and outward. And Duke's body went sailing through the door of an empty boxcar.

It would be morning before he awakened, Mitch surmised, probably in Arizona. If he wanted to get off the train, all he had to do was roll himself out the door.

Mitch went back to the house, mounted the steps silently, and opened the screen. He held it with his foot, and knocked.

"Dukie?" A gay trill came from the girl. "Com-ing!"

There was a scurry of slippered feet. Then a delicious, "Duke, hon-ee!" as she flung the door open wide, and looked out.

Mitch belted her in the stomach, said, "Hon-ee to you, honey," and went in.

The chalice was on the table in an opened overnight case. Mitch examined it fondly, put it back in the case and snapped the catches on it.

The redhead was staggering around the room, gasping, bent over like a clothespin. As she came near him, Mitch gave her a light tap on the temple, then strolled into the bedroom as she crumpled to the floor.

He frisked that room and all the others. The results were very satisfying. Like Bette, the girl seemed to be a frugal type, for she had wads of bills stashed all over the joint. Mitch returned to the living room some three thousand dollars richer than he had been.

He took a roll of tape from his pocket, and squatted over the girl. She was dressed for her date with Duke—or pretty well undressed. Mitch thought this was a very happy coincidence. He had a job in mind for her, and what she was wearing—or wasn't wearing—would do nicely as a uniform.

She waked up as he completed his binding and gagging. She couldn't talk, naturally, but her eyes asked a frightened question.

Mitch gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, babe. You're going for a nice little ride, and then I'm going to drop you off at a friend's house. A very sweet old lady that runs kind of a social club."

For some reason, the girl didn't seem at all reassured. She squirmed wildly, her face reddening as she tried to curse Mitch through her gag.

Mitch shook his head reprovingly. "Why, how ungrateful of you! Just for that you have to go to bed early."

He gave her a tap on the chin. The girl went promptly to sleep. Mitch slung her over his shoulder, and stood up.

It was a little before dawn when he dumped her on Mame Dorset's front porch in Los Angeles. He rang the doorbell, trotted back to the Cad and drove away.

He rode around for an hour or so, then ate a leisurely breakfast at a drive-in restaurant. Afterwards he headed for the business section, turning in finally at a used-car dealer's.

He had the registration papers on the car. He also had Duke's driver's license and certain other identification. The dealer offered him three grand for the Cad, then

went up to thirty-three hundred. Mitch accepted this last bid, and took a cab to that "right" dealer in art objects.

He was a gnomish little old guy, with twinkling black eyes and a head of thick gray hair. His hands moved over the cup lovingly, patting and caressing it as though it were alive.

"Beautiful, oh, but beautiful! And exactly as Cellini describes it in the Autobiography. He made it for—was it the Doge, or the King of France? Well, no matter." He gave it a final pat, and looked up at Mitch. "Doc Krug, eh? I had heard some rumors—unfounded, I thought—that it was in his possession."

"Doc Krug," Mitch nodded.

"And how is the good doctor?"

"He's got a few lumps," Mitch said. "He's staying in a cesspool for awhile.

"Very shrewd of him," the dealer said gravely. "The cool atmosphere will reduce the swelling. Now as to your price, Mr. Allison—I think ten thousand is a little exorbitant."

"I don't."

"What would you say to the suggestion that you make me a present of it, out of gratitude for my failure to call the police?"

"I'd tell you to go to hell," Mitch said.

"We-ll . . ." the dealer shrugged. "One must always try, you know. Do you mind taking a check?"

"Why should I?" Mitch said. "You'll go right along to the bank with me to get it cashed."

There were a number of people waiting to board the Chicago-bound Super Chief. One of the finest trains in the world, the Super Chief is invariably well-patronized, despite the somewhat awesome prices on its deluxe accommodations.

Mitch stood a little to the rear of the well-dressed crowd; tired from much rushing around, but still very happy. There was a thousand-dollar watch on his wrist. He was wearing five hundred dollars in clothes, and there was another five hundred bucks' worth in his two new suitcases. He looked more prosperous, better turned out, than anybody here. And still, despite his expenditures, he had almost twenty thousand dollars in cash.

He was set, loaded. He could burn it up for the next year, without turning a lick. He could—but he wouldn't. Already his eyes were roving the crowd, searching, seeking; hunting. He did it unconsciously. Because he was a hustler, and a hustler must always hustle.

His gaze roved. It ceased to rove. His eyes narrowed, held on the target. Then, they shifted casually

and he looked in another direction.

Those were his marks—an elderly couple in good but ill-fitting clothes. Probably retired farmers, Mitch guessed. People who'd knocked themselves out all their lives, and had saved every penny they'd made. They'd have money all right. If they didn't, they wouldn't be riding the Super Chief.

Mitch looked their way again. His eyes caught theirs, and he smiled. They smiled back at him timidly, then put their heads together and began to whisper.

Mitch grinned to himself. They'd be talking about him, now. Wondering if they'd be able to get acquainted with him. As a matter of fact, the old couple was doing exactly that:

"A chump, Papa?"

"The best kind, Mama. A hustler with a load."

"I figure, too. The more they got the hungrier they look. The retired farmer routine?"

"Uh-huh. Don't trust banks. Never had time to learn none of these hyar-now card games."

"Papa!" The woman snickered softly. "How do we tie into him?"

"We don't. He'll tie into us. Watch!"

A warm smile on his face, Mitch Allison was coming toward them.



Small Bosom—Big Haul

Smugglers are the most persistent of law-breakers; they are also the most creative. Daily, in every port and airport in the world, customs officials are asked to match wits with these tariff evaders. One case involved a New York City matron who thought she had found a new way to smuggle gold into the states. She had it melted down and placed in a corset as corset stays. However the matron examining her immediately became suspicious when she noted the woman was utterly lacking in feminine bulges and yet had a great amount of stays fitted into her corset. A closer examination revealed the hidden cache.

I should prefer not to preface this story in any manner whatever. I think you will understand why when you have finished reading it.

WETBACK



by Murray Wolf

I WILL tell it now. All of it, and I hope well enough. It has taken five years to learn to tell it. Five years from the time of the knife to this time of the pen . . .

It was summer and Antonio laughed at me. It was the night of the party that my cousin Antonio laughed at me because I wouldn't come away from the window, because I kept staring out over the city, at the buildings and the lights that went on and on into the distance, until the haze swallowed them up.

"Come away from the window, Juan," Antonio said. "The city won't go away."

His friends laughed with him.

"Maybe he's afraid he'll go away," Pepe said. "Maybe he's afraid the border police will catch him, send him back to Mexico."

I turned away from the city toward them, for a moment feeling a cold ache in my stomach. Yes, I thought, that's what I'm afraid of, even if Antonio says it's silly. Antonio says I'm here now, all I've got to do is learn English and I'll be all right.

"Squares I've seen before," Miguel said. "But this one . . ."

"This one is my cousin," Antonio said. His voice wasn't laughing now. He leaned toward Miguel, a strange, almost angry look on his face.

"Sure," Miguel said. "Sure."

They lapsed back into English. I tried to listen, to understand them, but I couldn't understand too much. They were drinking wine, the same red wine I'd drunk at home, in San Ysidro, in the mountains of Sonora; the room had many of the home smells, wine and chili and garlic. But it wasn't like my village.

I stared out over Los Angeles, toward the palm trees and the endless traffic and the people, so many people, more than I had ever imagined living in the entire world.

My cousin Antonio didn't know how lucky he was. He was just my age, seventeen, three months younger than I, actually; yet already he had a big room of his own, with space for a cot and a chair and a table, a room he could visit his friends in without Mama and Papa and his sisters underfoot. He had good clothes too. He and his friends all had shiny purple jackets, with bulls' heads on them. *"Baje Los Toros,"* the jackets said. "Down with the Bulls." Antonio said it was a joke.

"Come, Juan," Antonio called. "Have some wine."

I shook my head. "Later."

"He's drunk with the bright lights," Miguel said. Pepe laughed with him. My cousin didn't laugh, and after a minute the other two

stopped and they were all quiet.

Two weeks I've been here, I thought, fifteen days since I crossed the border . . . The village seemed far, far away in time. It was hard to believe that there, at home, my mother and my little brothers would be eating dinner as usual and maybe wondering where I was . . . I'll never go back, I promised myself, staring out past the fire escape, over the roof of the house in front, across Chavez Ravine to the high buildings and the endless streams of cars on the freeway below. Maybe later, I thought, when I have the money, I can send for Mama and the boys.

I was just thinking this, looking forward to the day when I could mail the money home, when I heard the knock on the door. It was the knock all of Antonio's friends used, two quick raps, a pause, and then two more.

"Come in," Antonio called.

The door opened and Antonio's other friend, the short, chunky one they called Switch, stepped inside. I was sorry, in a way, that he was there. I didn't like Switch, though I'd never mentioned how I felt to Antonio. Why should I speak against my cousin's friends? But Switch had a loose mouth; he called girls *putas*, and not only the girls from Mama Ortegas'. I'd heard him speak of Antonio's sister Rosa this way once, and Rosa was a good girl, like an iceberg when you told her nice things. Once I'd seen him try to pinch Rosa; she'd hit him and said, "I'll tell my brother," and Switch had just laughed and walked away.

"That all you can do?" Switch said. "Sit around and swill wine, like old men?"

"What else?" my cousin said. "We should go to the YMCA, maybe?"

They all laughed. I laughed too, to be polite, though I didn't understand the joke. Switch dropped down on the cot beside my cousin and reached for the wine bottle.

"I know of a party," he said. "They've got lots of food, lots of liquor—they can't ever put it all away without help."

"Who?" Antonio said. "Some of the Aces?"

"It's too hot for a rumble," Miguel said, reaching for the wine.

"No," Switch said. "Not the Aces. It's a private party. One of the anglo kids is giving it. You know, Terry Fletcher, over on Avenue 60."

"Might be an idea," Pepe said. "They'd be real glad to see us, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah," Switch said. "Real glad."

Miguel reached for his purple jacket. He'd taken it off earlier, when he'd said it was too hot.

"What're we waiting for?" he asked.

My cousin hesitated. He looked over at me, then at the others.

"I don't know about Juan," he said uncertainly.

"Oh, bring the kid along." Switch turned to me. "You'd like to go to an honest-to-God-American birthday party, wouldn't you, kid?"

I didn't like the way he said it, the half-smile on his face, but then, I never liked the way Switch said anything.

"Is it a fiesta?" I said.

"Yeah. That's just what it's going to be. A fiesta."

"I'd like to go," I said.

Antonio hesitated. Then he turned and went over to his closet and pulled out a purple jacket. One of the sleeves was torn and the colors were faded, but it had the bull's head on the back.

"Good I didn't throw this away," Antonio said. "Here, Juan. Put this on."

It was a little tight over my shoulders, but I didn't care. I zipped it up and turned back and forth, looking at my reflection in the cracked glass hanging on the closet door. Now I look like an Americano, I thought. For the first time.

"Come on," Switch said.

In the room outside, the family room where Mama Lopez had just finished cleaning up after dinner, Rosa stood watching us.

"Hi, baby," Switch said in English.

She turned away from him. Her glance slid past Pepe and Miguel and her brother; it started to slide past me but stopped.

"Juan, you going with them?" she asked, and stared at me.

I wondered why her voice sounded so sad.

"Yes," I said. "We're going to a party."

For the first time, she reached out to me. Her hand was soft against mine. She was so pretty it hurt to look at her, just at the stage where a girl starts turning into a woman. She smelled of soap and perfume and, underneath, the soft woman-smell the girls of San Ysidro had.

"Don't go, Juan."

Switch laughed.

Mama Lopez swung around toward him, as if about to say something, then tossed her head angrily and turned away.

"You want to go to the party, Rosa?" I said.

"No." She pulled her hand away and turned her back on me.

"Come on." Antonio started for the door. He sounded embarrassed.

I followed them, out into the street. I wished Rosa could have come with us, but maybe it wasn't the custom for girls to go to this kind of party. I couldn't get used to the customs, here in Los Angeles.

By now, after two weeks, I was no longer so terrified of the cars, the way my cousin drove, cutting in and out of traffic on the freeway, with other drivers honking and yelling at him. Besides, just about the time I really began to get

scared, we pulled off the freeway and turned up a wide, quiet street, with big houses on either side, and lawns and rows of flowers and trees.

At the end of the block, one house was all lit up. Music poured out the open windows, the strange gringo music I'd never really learned to like. I heard laughter, both men's and women's, and I wondered, as we pulled up to park in front, why we couldn't have brought Rosa. Unless maybe the women here were from Mama Ortegas' . . .

"That's Luis' car up ahead," Switch said. "I told him and the Barros to meet us here. Better to have seven, eight guys, play it cool . . ."

We walked toward the house, toward the music and the laughter. From the other car three boys whom I'd never seen before got out and fell in beside us. They wore the purple jackets too.

"Do we knock?" one of them said.

"No," Switch said. "We walk right in."

I straightened my shoulders in the tight jacket as he pushed the door open. Inside, all I could see at first was a very big room, like something out of the moving pictures, with the furniture pushed back and couples dancing. There were so many girls in bright dresses it was hard to look on any one of them.

The others pushed past me inside. I just stood in the doorway, staring. I'd never dreamed the party would be like this. I'd never dreamed a house would be like this, except maybe in Hollywood—all shiny floors and great windows that filled up a whole wall and, beyond one window, a floodlighted terrace with a swimming pool.

I don't know how long I stared before the music stopped and first one, then another, of the dancers swung around and faced us. The room had been full of noise, people talking and laughing over the music. As they turned to us, the laughter stopped.

"What's the matter?" I said, in Spanish. No one answered me.

Switch was walking across the room, toward the table loaded with food that stood at the far end, up against a wall that was solid wood instead of a window. As he went toward it, the people fell back away from him, opening up an aisle for him to walk through, toward the table.

At the far end of the room, a boy stood waiting. There was a girl with him, but she stepped behind him as Switch came up, so that all I could see was the boy.

"Hello, Terry," Switch said.

"What are you doing here?" I understood enough English to know what he was saying, but I didn't understand why his voice was so choked up.

"Oh, we knew it was just a mis-

take you didn't send us invitations, Terry. We knew you'd want us to come . . ."

It was so quiet I could hear the people out on the terrace splashing in the pool. Somebody dived off the high board and hit wrong, the water flying up all over, and a couple of girls in bright bathing caps laughed. They didn't even glance toward the house. They hadn't seen us yet.

"Okay, Switch," Terry said. "Okay."

He stepped back away from the table and waved his hands at the food, lots of bits of meat sliced up real small and little fishes and cheese and other things I didn't recognize.

"Help yourselves."

My cousin Antonio picked up some bread and a slice of meat.

"That's just what we're going to do," he said. His voice didn't sound at all like it usually did; it was rough like coarse sand.

He's scared too, I thought. It made me feel better, to realize that my cousin, who'd been born in Los Angeles, was nervous in a house like this one. I smiled and went over to the nearest couple.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Juan." It still seemed strange, hearing my own voice say things in English.

The girl backed away from me. The boy with her, a blond kid about my age, muttered, "Hello," and then sort of looked past me, as if I wasn't there. His Adam's apple kept jumping up and down in his throat.

Up where Switch was, an older man and woman had just come in from some room in the back. The man put his hand on Terry Fletcher's shoulder.

"I'm Ralph Fletcher," he said. His voice sounded very loud over the quiet in the room. "This is my house. I don't think I, or my son, invited you into it."

"Oh, don't feel bad, Mr. Fletcher," Switch said. "We don't carry grudges."

The woman kept edging sideways, toward the telephone on the stand by the table. Switch stepped between her and it. He was smiling, more happy looking than I'd ever seen him, as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his knife.

The woman froze. She let out a little gasp and stepped back, toward the man.

"Easy, Martha," Mr. Fletcher said.

Switch snapped the blade open. If anything, the room grew stiller than ever. He made me nervous too, and I'd seen him play with the knife before; he was always playing with it, sometimes throwing it, but more often just snapping it open and shut.

"You wouldn't want to call anyone, now would you, Mrs. Fletcher?" he asked. "You wouldn't want to break up the party . . ."

He picked up the telephone cord and held it in his left hand.

"Course you wouldn't," he said, snapping the knife down, into the cord. The two cut halves fell loose at his feet. Why should he cut the cord? This I did not understand—not at all.

"Start up the music!" he cried. "Let's have some fun!"

My cousin Antonio grabbed hold of the girl beside him. The boy she was with started to protest, then backed off. The music started up, a *baile* this time, with the good strong beat I'd always liked to hear, fiesta music. The girl was pretty stiff, but Antonio was a wonderful dancer. He knew all the steps. He led her through them, while the kids at the party stood back and watched them. Anyone, I thought, would stop to watch my cousin, when he was really dancing.

After a while Pepe and Miguel and the others joined in. Switch just stood by the table, talking to Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher; I couldn't hear what he was saying, over the music. Then he swung around, facing out at the kids who'd been at the party before us.

"Hey, you squares, you dance too. Don't just stand there gawking . . ."

The party started up again, with everyone dancing, but somehow it wasn't the same as before. For one thing, no one was laughing. I thought it must be because of Switch and his knife.

I turned to the girl I'd said hello to earlier. She looked frightened.

"You want to dance?" I said.

She didn't answer. The boy she was with pushed her forward.

"Don't make them mad," he said.

I danced with her until the music changed, but it wasn't much fun. She was like lead in my arms. I thought, no, this girl isn't from Mama Ortegas' or anywhere like that; she's too unfriendly. I tried dancing with another girl, but it wasn't any better. If only I'd brought Rosa, I thought. She'd probably never been to a party like this.

After awhile I grew tired of dancing. Somehow, the longer I stayed at the party, the more disappointing it became. It didn't seem like a fiesta. No one was having fun. I kept thinking, they were having fun until we came. Maybe we should have stayed away. Maybe they didn't want us.

It made me feel bad, thinking like that. Even my purple jacket didn't help. I went outside, past Mrs. Fletcher, who looked very white and sort of sick, out onto the terrace. Something was wrong, this I knew for a certainty. What—I didn't know.

No one was swimming now. The kids had all come out of the pool and were huddled back at the far end of the terrace, by the diving boards. Then I saw Switch. He was down at the far end of the pool, beside a little house that first I thought must be for the plumb-

ing and then I realized probably wasn't, not here. He was talking to a girl.

My cousin Antonio was dancing and I didn't want to bother him. Pepe and Miguel were dancing too. I thought, I want to go home. I don't like the party; it doesn't have the fiesta mood, at least, not for me. I don't belong here.

I wanted to tell someone I was leaving. I didn't want my cousin to worry about me, later. I started over toward Switch. Though I did not like to speak to him, he was near.

As I moved to him, he pushed open the door of the little house and stepped in, pulling the girl after him. She started to cry out; then I heard her voice choke off as if Switch's hand had come over her mouth. I stopped and looked back, toward the boys at the other end of the pool. They were too far away; they hadn't heard anything. Probably, they hadn't seen anything either.

I didn't know what to do. Maybe this sort of thing always happened at parties in Los Angeles. I doubted it, though. My cousin Antonio wouldn't make a girl go with him, I thought, not if she was crying. I remembered the day Switch had pinched Rosa, and how mad she'd been.

"Hey!" I called. "Switch!"

The door to the little house was unlocked. I pulled it open and went in after him. Inside it was very dark; all I could see was the vague outline of furniture and, against the far wall, two figures struggling. I could hear the girl's muffled cries.

"You let her go," I said.

"Keep out of this, kid . . ."

I could see them now, Switch holding the girl's hands pinned behind her with one of his hands, while the other was over her mouth.

"You get out," he said.

"Not till you let her go."

"Why are you worried over her? She's just a *puta*."

"Then why's she crying?"

I started toward him. There wasn't any use arguing with him, I knew. I'd have to make him let her go. I knew now that I'd been right when I'd disliked Switch, when I'd wondered why he was my cousin's friend. He was bad.

He had been holding the girl tight against him, much too tight. As I came up he pushed her roughly away. He reached into his pocket and I saw, in the dim light, the knife flash out.

"I told you to get out, kid . . ."

The girl huddled back against the wall. Her dress was ripped down from the shoulder, clear across her breast; for a moment, she didn't seem to realize it. I saw her slight figure and thought, she's no *puta*, she's a child—and just then she sobbed and covered her breast with her hands and shrank back still farther away from us.

I kept coming, toward the knife. I didn't feel mixed up now. I didn't feel I had to make excuses for Switch. He was bad; there couldn't be any doubts now that he was bad. I had to help the girl.

The knife blade flashed out at me. I laughed. I'd played with knives myself, in the mountains.

I jumped to the side and the knife went by me. I'd misjudged though; I felt it rip through the elbow of my purple jacket. Then, before Switch could hit again, I grabbed his wrist with one hand and his upper arm with the other and levered him forward at the same time I kicked him.

He screamed as he fell. I didn't know if I'd broken his arm or not. I didn't care.

"You fight with knives," I said, "you should learn to use them better."

There were a dozen men around my village better than Switch. Even I was better, and I didn't like knives.

He kept moaning, on the floor. I picked up his knife and snapped the blade shut and put it in my jacket pocket. Then I reached out to the girl.

She backed away from me. She kept on crying, her hands over her breast. She was still crying when I carried Switch outside and dumped him down in the bright lights of the terrace.

The Fletchers were the first to come over to me. They stood staring down at Switch. After a minute, the couples started coming over, leaving the dance floor and crowding out around the pool.

"I'm sorry," I said. "He tried to hurt the girl."

She had followed me outside. She held up her torn dress and stared down at Switch. She had stopped crying, finally, and I was glad. I hated to see girls cry.

My cousin Antonio was staring at me across the crowd. He had a very strange look on his face, almost as if he hated me.

"We'd better leave," I said to him, in Spanish. "I don't think they'll want any of us here, now."

Antonio disappeared in the crowd. I looked around. I didn't see any purple jackets anywhere, except Switch. I wondered if I should leave by myself and try to find my way back to my cousin's or whether I should stay with Switch.

While I was still thinking about it, I heard the sirens.

The police were inside the house, coming toward me, before I realized what the sirens meant. I felt, all of a sudden, terribly frightened. They've come to take me back, I thought; they'll send me back to the village. I turned to run, but the wall reached clear around the terrace and there was no way out except past the uniformed men who were coming toward me.

I stared around me, at the beautiful house and the girls in their

rich, soft clothes, and I thought, If they send me back I'll never see this again. Never.

"Don't be afraid," Mr. Fletcher said. "I'll tell them what you did. I'll tell them you helped us."

I didn't understand. I just stood there, with all the anglo kids staring at me and talking in English much too fast for me to understand them. Then the policemen had closed in around me and one of them grabbed hold of my arm.

"Okay, come on, you."

The boys and girls stood back away from us as they led me out. Behind me, I could hear Switch crying and cursing as they dragged him after me. I felt ashamed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry we ruined your party."

They didn't answer me.

In the police car, going down to the jail, Switch turned his back on me. I was just as glad. I had enough troubles. The handcuffs made me feel I'd done something really bad, for which I'd be punished. Something much worse than just slipping across the border without papers. The police car turned onto the freeway, and the city began sliding past us, and, finally, the lights of the police building were just ahead.

I wanted to jump from the car, run out into the city and keep on running. But I couldn't. I knew there was nothing I could do now.

Once we reached the jail, two of the policemen took me away from Switch, into a little room. They started asking me questions about what had happened, but they were talking English much too fast and I couldn't quite understand. I shook my head.

"Get Jose," one of them said. "He can talk to the kid."

I didn't know what I should do. I didn't know if I should tell them about Switch or not. After all, he was my cousin's friend. Then I saw the door open and the Fletchers come in, the father and the mother and the son. I looked down, at my hands.

Mr. Fletcher came over to me.

"I wanted to thank you," he said. "I wanted to tell you I'd help you, if I can."

"Is the girl all right?" I said.

"She's pretty upset," he said. "You know what could have happened."

I nodded. I thought of Rosa, backing away from Switch. I thought of how Rosa always avoided him, of how she'd never stay around if he was in the house, unless Antonio was there.

"He's bad," I said.

A policeman who had just come into the room walked over to me. He was Mexican; it made me feel better to see him.

"Yes," he said in Spanish. "He's bad, all right." And then he asked me what had happened.

I found myself telling the Mexican policeman everything. He was-

n't rough, like the others; he didn't yell at me. He just kept nodding his head and saying, "Yes, I see why you did that. Yes, I understand . . ."

I felt better when I'd told him. I felt better still when they put me in a cell all by myself, where I didn't have to listen to Switch cursing at me.

In the morning the family came, Antonio and Rosa and Mama. Mama just cried. Rosa came up to me and her hands touched mine through the wire screen that separated me from the visiting room.

"Oh, Juan. I told you not to go to the party."

"You were right, Rosa."

Her fingers were cool against mine. She's so pretty, I thought, so much prettier than any of those girls last night. I didn't like to see her crying for me.

"But if I hadn't gone," I said, "look what might have happened. You know what Switch would have done to that girl."

"I don't care." She sobbed. "I don't care . . ."

She walked away from me, over to Mama. Antonio came up. All the time Rosa had been with me, he'd just hung back, watching.

"I hope you're satisfied, Juan," he said. "My cousin. My own cousin."

I just stared at him.

"They're holding Switch for trial," he said. "I suppose you know that, don't you, Juan?"

I shook my head. Besides, I thought, even if they were, it was a good thing. If you were bad, like Switch, you shouldn't be left loose to hurt other people.

"We take you in," Antonio said. "We give you a home. Because you're family." He spat on the floor. "A wetback rat, that's what you are, butting in on things you don't know anything about."

His eyes weren't Antonio's eyes at all. They were ugly, as if he really hated me, as if he'd have killed me if he got the chance.

"You squealed," he said. "You better be glad they're deporting you, Juan. You better be glad they're shipping you back to Mexico. Because if you stayed here, you wouldn't live very long. You know that, don't you?"

The only thing that meant anything to me, at the time he spoke to me, was what he'd said about them deporting me. I believed him. It was what I'd been sure would happen, ever since the police had caught me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry if I caused any trouble."

He started to walk away, then swung around and came right up to the wire screen.

"The jacket," he said. "You give it back, right now, you hear? Why'd I ever let you wear it, you—"

I took the jacket off. It made me feel real bad, not having it any more, even if it was faded and

torn and with the new big slit in the elbow where Switch had cut it the night before.

"Just drop it on the floor," my cousin said. "I want to be sure you don't have it when they take you back."

I let the jacket fall. I wanted to try to explain, but I couldn't. I didn't know the customs and besides, even if I had known them, maybe I still couldn't have explained. It looked, now, as if Antonio would rather have let Switch have the girl. I couldn't understand.

I looked over his head at Rosa. She had stopped crying and was standing very stiff, as if braced against tears. She waved to me when the guards came up and led me away.

"Adios, Juan," she said.

Not, "hasta la vista . . . until we meet again . . ." but the formal, final good-bye.

"Adios, Rosa."

She was gone when the truck with the bars in it picked us up, me and some other Mexicans who had come across the border for the harvest. The truck was headed for the border. It had no windows, but the guards let me go to the back and stare out through the heavy screens, at the freeway behind me and the great tall buildings and the city, sleepy now in the early morning, the great, beautiful city I knew I'd never see again.



Life or Death

Alfred Hitchcock was returning from Europe aboard the *Queen Mary* after finishing shooting a movie on the Riviera. Sitting in a deck chair besides him was a kindly, elderly woman who finally summoned up enough courage to speak with him.

"Tell me, Mr. Hitchcock," she began, "why does a refined, cultured, pleasant man like yourself create so many pictures about crime and violence?"

"Well," replied Hitch, "when I was a very young boy I thought I should like to be a doctor and prolong people's lives. As I grew older and realized how dull most people's lives really are . . . I thought I should like to prolong the suspense."

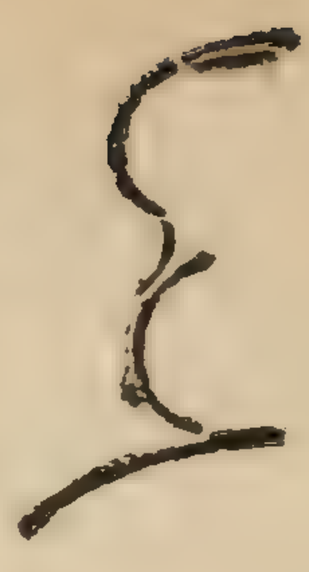
by Borden Deal

a bottle of wine



THE JUDGE sat in a chair where he could see the door entering into the hall from outside. He was waiting. His wife had phoned fifteen minutes ago and he knew that in any minute up to the next ten he would see her again. He sat stiffly, rigidly, as though he were sitting behind his bench downtown, and his mind was as frozen and hard as his face.

"When Grace and I were married," the judge explained to his wife's lover as they sat imbibing the fine topaz liquid, "we felt that a touch of illicitness was desirable." This sounds very sophisticated and placid, now doesn't it? The truth of the matter is that one of these charming characters is about to have his head blown off . . .



The Judge was a big man. His heavy frame gave majesty to his grave demeanor and his craggy, lined face forbade human approach. His hair was white, not full-white but grizzled with the crow's-wing black it had once been. It was not whiter than it had been the day he had married the woman he was waiting for now.

The house was silent around him. It was a two-story, white clapboarded, set back from the street in old trees. It was comfortable and worn, like the chair he was sitting in, the upholstery faded, the cloth fringing over the round of wood at the sides. It was a house that had been here in this land for a long time for it had been built and furnished by his father, the old judge.

He heard the sound of a motor. He did not move, but there was a hardening in him. His mind followed the motor to a stop beside the house, listened to the click of heels on the porch, felt the unhesitating turn of the doorknob. I knew she would come back, he thought. I knew I would see her one more time. Just once.

The door was open, then, and she was looking at him. "Hello, Judge," she said.

He listened to her voice carefully. It was not strained. It was not her bright, careless voice either. It was just a carrier for the noncommittal words.

"Hello, Grace," he said, wondering how his own voice sounded. He couldn't tell. He watched for its effect in her face but he could see none. It wore the bright, varnished look she took to bridge parties and wives' committees, as though her features, her expression, her eyes, had been sprayed with the fixing preparation she used on her hair.

Now at last, he thought, I know for a truth that you are a bitch. I've suspected it almost all the years of our marriage. But now I know. And a vain one, too . . . she couldn't go away forever without all the expensive clothing in the closets upstairs. Vain and practical, torturing a man for a few bright rags of shaped cloth.

"I came to get my clothes," she said, the voice still as neutral as sunshine. "I hope you don't mind."

"Then you're going," he said. "You're really going, after all."

She moved toward him, put a foot on the first riser of the stair. "Of course," she said. "You've known. You've known for a week now." She stopped, watching him. Then she went on. "I'll get them. It won't take me long and then . . ."

"Your friend," he said. "Where is he? Waiting in a motel somewhere?"

She did not stop this time. She dropped the neutral, emotionless words down the stairs almost carelessly. "He's waiting in the car. I needed someone to help with the luggage."

He was alone again now. I didn't think she'd do that, he told himself painfully. He stood up, lifting the tail of the light linen coat he wore even in the summer heat, and took the .38 pistol from his hip pocket. He looked at it thoughtfully for a moment. Then he put it back into his hip pocket and walked to the door.

When he opened it the outside heat blasted at him, slapping him in the face like a hand. Even the big trees did not stop it. He thought of the sun baking on the concrete streets downtown and felt the sweat start on his forehead in tiny beads.

He went to the end of the porch and looked at the young man sitting in the car. The man's face turned toward him in sudden startlement and The Judge saw clinically that he was very good-looking and probably younger than Grace. He walked down the steps and leaned on the window-rim of the car, looking in.

"I'm Grace's husband," he said unnecessarily. "You must be Wallace."

He studied the wariness in the young, smooth face, waited patiently until it went away, until Wallace decided there was no danger of violence or harsh words. It must have taken some doing, The Judge thought, for him to come out here in the first place.

"Come on in the house and wait," he said. "This heat will kill you, sitting out here in the car."

The young man hesitated, then opened the door on his side and got out. He was rangy and tanned and beside The Judge's harsh grayness he looked very young. Grace picked well, The Judge thought ungrudgingly. I wonder if he has money, too. Yes, he must have money.

Wallace came around the front of the car toward The Judge, his eyes studying The Judge's face. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I didn't want to come . . ."

"But Grace must have someone to help with the luggage," The Judge said gently. "You can't expect a lady to wrestle luggage in

this heat. And I'm an old man . . ."

He took Wallace's arm and urged him toward the house, talking about the thick walls that insulated against the sun, how pleasant the house always was in the summertime even though it was hard to heat in winter. He mentioned how thin the walls of modern homes are now, as thin as cracker boxes, and how it takes air-conditioning to make them livable this far south.

"But they keep on building them that way," he said thoughtfully. "Sometimes I think there's nothing as bullheaded and grasping as the building industry. Nothing at all."

They were in the living room now, without the young man having to talk under the casual flow of The Judge's words, and it was cooler here. The Judge could feel the momentary sweat evaporating, aerating his shirt under the linen coat, and for a moment he chilled until his body adjusted to the changed condition.

"Sit down," he said. "I'll be back in a moment."

He went into the kitchen, leaving Wallace alone. He stood at the back stairs before going down into the cellar, listening, but he could hear nothing of her movements. The cellar was cool, too, and dark, and he had to grope for the light cord dangling somewhere in the middle of the space. He found it, then he went unerringly to the shelf he sought, feeling far back for the bottle in the wicker basket.

He looked at it, the tactile touch of dust and cobwebs on his hands. For ten years it had lain here, gathering dust, waiting in just the way The Judge had waited previously, upstairs. Except that this bottle could not wait long enough. Not now.

He turned out the light and groped blindly toward the steps, finding them at last with his seeking feet and then letting them lift him toward light again. He paused in the kitchen for full-bellied glasses and a corkscrew and put his shoulder against the door into the living room. He turned and let the door slide shut behind him, seeing Wallace again, still standing uncertainly in the middle of the room. Like a deer, The Judge thought, feeling the wind for danger. Young and rangy and quick to run away and very beautiful in the youngness.

"Sit down, man," he said. He smiled. "I know Grace. It'll be a while before she's ready to use you." He motioned with the bottle. "I thought we'd have a little sherry while we waited."

The young man did not move but The Judge ignored him while his old, wrinkled hands deftly set and twisted the corkscrew, lifting the rotten cork with one easy movement as he grasped the bottle between his knees.

He eased into his comfortable leather chair and looked up to see that the young man had not yet relaxed. "Wallace," he said. "This is a small town. I've lived here all my life, and my father and grandfather before me. I've been a lawyer here, and a judge. I've been The Judge for a long time." He stopped, looking down at the sherry bottle for a moment.

"I know this town," he said thoughtfully. "I know the South. I could shoot you and get off scot-free. You made yourself fair game the first time you put your arms around my wife. You may not have known that, since you're not local. But you couldn't find twelve men among our ten thousand who'd convict a husband for shooting his wife's lover. That's not the law, you understand—that's just the way it is."

Wallace did not move, but The Judge could feel the tightening against danger in him. He was afraid now, very afraid. I'm a terrifying old man, he thought with a touch of sadness. I never knew I'd live to a terrifying old age.

"For a long time I believed I would kill you," he said. "If I ever laid eyes on you for one instant. I love my wife. I'm an old man with a young wife and I love her with the foolishness that the young never know. They know delirium, they know passion, they know desire. But they never know the wondrous foolishness of an old man in love for the first time." He shook his head. "No, the young never know. They never understand."

He lifted his head. "So I was sure I'd shoot you." He stopped, brooding for a moment. He sighed, as though the remembering were a burden, too. "But I'm a law man, a lawyer and a judge. I've never believed in violence, seeing how it breeds hate and more violence, judging the results of violence every day in my court."

He leaned and carefully lifted the old bottle with both hands. He tilted it and poured lightly into his own glass, just a splash to give himself the floating bits of cork, then poured the young man's glass full. He finished filling his own.

"Sit down," he said mildly. "This is very good wine. You'll never taste the like again."

Wallace moved then, jerkily as a marionette, and sat. He lifted the glass and The Judge knew he wanted to gulp courage and assurance from the glass. He filled his mouth and then he stopped, tasting the old smooth richness of the wine, and a look of surprise crossed his face.

"Yes," The Judge said. "It *is* good. It's very old. We were saving it for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary."

Wallace stopped in the act of lifting the glass to his lips again. There was shock on his face.

"Go ahead," The Judge said.

"Drink it." His lips twisted. "There'll be no better time than now."

He leaned back in his chair, cradling the full-bellied coldness of the glass in both his palms. He swirled the liquid thoughtfully, looking down into the hypnotic topaz swirl.

"When Grace and I were married," he said. "We went to France for our honeymoon. It was . . . one of her conditions. She had never traveled, and she wanted to. We crossed over into Spain, and when we returned, we brought this bottle of rare old amontillado with us. Grace smuggled it through customs with the bottle taped to her body. We felt that a touch of illicitness was necessary and desirable. We planned to open it on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. We have saved it until now. Saved it for ten years."

Wallace lifted his glass again. He gulped this time, then he involuntarily sipped, tasting the autumn smoothness of the wine savoring the last few drops in his glass.

The Judge leaned to pour again. "Drink it slowly," he said. "It deserves to be appreciated. I have waited ten years to taste our illicit wine, and expected to wait for fifteen more. But it is right that we should drink it now, waiting for Grace. Don't you feel that it's right?"

"Sir," Wallace said. "I shouldn't have come. I know that, now and I'm . . ."

The Judge moved a hand. "I'm glad you did, Wally. I needed someone to talk to . . . and who better than the man she loves now? Who in the wide South would listen with more attention? And talk is a necessity of age . . . for talk is all that is left."

He stopped again, and there was silence in the room. He looked at the bottle and it was half-empty. Half-gone. The wine was bright and warm in him and he felt comfortable, sitting in his accustomed leather chair. There was still silence upstairs. It would take her a long time to pack with care, he thought. And Grace would pack that way—efficient as she was. We have time for a bottle of wine, he thought. Plenty of time.

"I was fifty years old when I met Grace," he said. "And, incredibly enough, I had never been in love, I don't know why. I had dated and danced and even kissed, though that was not as prevalent in my time as now. But—I had never loved."

He stopped, frowning into his glass. He looked at Wallace, saw his glass was still supplied, and went on. His voice rolled soft and slow in the still, cool air, Wallace sitting forward in his chair listening, and The Judge knew that he was no longer afraid.

"Grace was my secretary," he said. She was young and very effi-

cient and as beautiful as dawn and old brandy. I didn't know her folks, for she was new-people in town. But within a week I had fallen in love with her. Before Grace I would have said that such a thing was impossible.

"But Grace was very smart, as well as beautiful. She knew the usual relationship between a confirmed old bachelor and his secretary. She wasn't having any of that." He paused, adding the new words carefully. "I didn't know at the time that she was sleeping with a young clerk who worked down the hall. Of course, even if I had known, I don't think it would have mattered to me then."

He saw the shock in Wallace's face, saw him start to rise. "I don't want to listen to . . ." Wallace said stiffly.

He waved him down. "She's not like that any more," The Judge said. "She's changed and learned in ten years. God, *how* she's changed and learned. And she was never a slut."

There was silence again while he thought, remembered. Wallace sat back in his chair now, his momentary anger quelled, waiting for The Judge to continue. The Judge drank thoughtfully, tastefully, from his glass of old wine.

"It was pretty bad for me," he said. "I loved her. I lusted after her. I was old and incredible and crazy. I wanted her any way I could take her. And she was bright and efficient in fending me off. I groveled, almost, in her tracks for one willing smile from her lips. I gave her raises in pay and paid vacations." He paused, sighing. "It went on for a year that way. A full year—an interminably long time, to me."

He took the bottle again and lifted it to the light and watched the amber liquid sparkle. Then he poured the glasses full again and listened up the stairs. This time he heard a thump and a rustle.

"It won't be too long now," he said. "Before she's ready. You see, she knew what she wanted. Marriage. To me . . . fifty years old. But there was money, not much money but enough, and the good name. She was new in town, and I never knew where her family came from. She'll never tell you. I doubt if she even knows herself any longer. Women can forget at will things like origins and birthdays.

"Age? It didn't matter. I doubt if she ever saw me as a man, with passion in my body. I was The Judge, I was Carter, I was Cartersville. She loved me, not for me but for the freedom from her past. And I loved her though she had no pity for my love."

He frowned. "I didn't know this then, understand. I learned it slowly and painfully over the years and she will still deny every word of it. I won't tell you how we agreed to marry . . . it was an afternoon in

my office that I still don't like to remember and certainly not discuss. She waited a full year, moving her womanness before me every day, and then she ruthlessly closed her bargain."

He saw Wallace watching him. "You find it hard to believe, don't you?"

The young man's voice was uncertain. "It's different . . ."

"Yes," The Judge cut in. "She *is* different now. She was desperate then, you understand. She was twenty-five, and that clerk is still a clerk. She knew then he would always be a clerk. She's not desperate any more. She hasn't been desperate for a long time."

"But you had ten years," Wallace said, his voice brave in the silence. "You think of her now with bitterness and anger but you had ten years."

"Bitterness?" The Judge said. He smiled. "Anger? She made her bargain and she fulfilled it. She was mine, all mine and all the time, and I did not share her with anybody, not for years. She gave me the love my old heart and body wanted, in full measure and running over. She even gave me a son . . ."

Wallace moved in surprise. It was apparent that this fact was something Grace hadn't told him.

"You didn't know she had a son? Yes. His name is Bobby. He's away in school now. I wanted a son and we had one, though she insisted on a Caesarean. Just one. And now I am sixty, and she is going away."

"I do love her," Wallace said. "You may not be able to understand it or believe it, but I love her like I—"

"Of course," The Judge said. "Grace is all woman, and she can use all of it. I knew that you loved her. And you're not the first." He stopped again and looked at the bottle. This time Wallace handed him his glass without waiting for invitation.

"There's just enough for one more," The Judge said. "She should be through by then. Drink it slowly, for there's no other wine like this. No other wine at all."

He poured gracefully, ceremoniously, his dark, craggy face stooped over the glasses. They were both leaning forward watching the topaz richness flow in a live stream, then pool into beauty again in the glasses.

The Judge sat back and lifted his glass. "She began to drift about two years ago," he said. "I was fifty-eight then. I saw it coming and there was no way of stopping it. I knew it would come to this when she found the right one. I have been waiting for you, Wally." He looked at him over the rim of his glass. "I wonder what it is you have that she wants, Wally. I wonder."

Wallace was watching him, holding his glass still. His handsome

face was as still as his hands, watching the old Judge, not knowing exactly what to say. And so he said nothing, waiting for The Judge to go on.

"And I believe I know," The Judge said. He laughed, a startling sound in the hushed, cool room. "It's youth, Wally. She wants the youngness of you, just as I wanted her youngness a long time ago. How old are you, Wally? She's thirty-five."

Wally moved. The Judge knew his words had touched him, stirred him. "I love her, sir. You know that. I love her. Whatever I've got, I'll give her. Youth or money or . . ."

"Yes," The Judge said softly. "Yes, I know you do. I know you will."

Wally straightened his young body. "I'm glad I came now," he said. "I'm glad I talked to you. I was afraid. Any man would be, in a situation like this. Not physically, but of a scene. Now that I've seen your reasonableness, your intelligent approach . . ."

The Judge listened critically to the young, fumbling words. The fast-drunk wine was strong in Wallace. The Judge did not feel it at all. "You don't have to say it," he said. "I know what you mean. You're trying to say that we needed to drink a bottle of old wine between us." He lifted his glass and swallowed. "Drink up. There's just a taste of it left. Just a taste of illicit wine, after ten years."

Wallace lifted the glass and drank. While he did it, The Judge shifted his weight off the .38 in his hip pocket. He shot Wallace in the head as he put his glass down, empty. There was a momentary surprise on Wallace's face at the impact of the bullet, a shocked surprise as he looked at The Judge, and saw, and slumped forward on the old, worn rug between the two friendly chairs.

The Judge was surprised, too. He hadn't believed he was going to do it until the last moment, until he saw the last drop of old wine disappear down the young man's throat.

The single shot echoed wildly, reverberatingly, in the old house. The sound filled the house like the cry of a baby, and he knew that Grace had heard. He rose and picked up the wine bottle in his left hand, still holding the gun with the other.

He moved toward the stairs, hearing the sudden hysterical flurry of her footsteps in the hall. He looked up into her downward-peering face, white and stricken. Even in the dimness of the stairwell he could see the harsh stricken lines there. *Yes,* he thought. *Now you're thirty-five.*

"Judge!" she said, her voice almost a scream. The polish was gone now, the hard sleekness in which she wrapped herself. "Judge! What did you do!"

"Grace," he said. "We killed the bottle of old wine we were saving. We killed it between us."

He dropped the warm pistol, then, from his right hand. It thudded on the floor. He watched her eyes for a moment. Then he turned away toward the telephone in the hall.

As he made the call, he still held the bottle in his other hand. It was empty now, and ordinary; just old glass, without the magic of old wine within it.

Joe DiMaggio to the Rescue

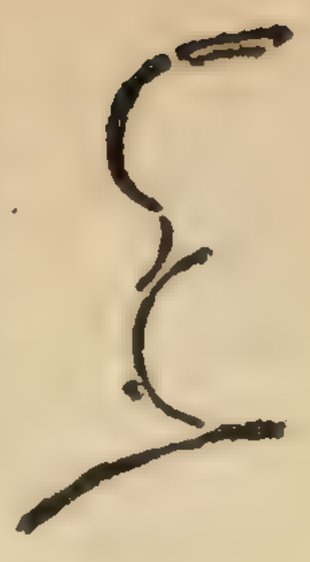
While shooting a sequence in a movie, Alfred Hitchcock was having a bit of trouble getting just the right reaction from a small boy in the cast.

In the scene the boy comes across the victim who has been murdered by a severe beating . . . the victim is lying with his eyes wide open in a hayloft.

Hitch wanted the youngster to register fright and fear . . . yet retain a boyish reaction to this horrible sight. After working on the lad to get just the right mood and failing, he asked the boy, "Are you a baseball fan?"

The boy nodded he was. "All right then," said Hitch, "when you come upon the body, make believe Joe DiMaggio had given you an autographed baseball, and you have just come across your little brother scraping off the signature with your mother's nail file."

I am inviting you on this interesting drive from Reno to Los Angeles not because of the warm fresh air, the scenery, or the pretty blonde on the front seat. I invite you to help Matt Brady understand why those people are tailing him . . . that they're itchy to ventilate him, at precisely the right moment, with a .45.



return trip

by Eugene Pawley

I'D MADE this five-hundred mile haul to Reno and now this joker tells me I can't unload. The thermometer outside was vaulting up around three figures and my rig stood against the curb, an assortment of roulette wheels and crap tables weighing her down. The smell of fresh paint hung heavy in the over-sized hall being made ready for the usual business hereabouts; the air-conditioning unit hadn't been installed yet. I touched a sleeve to my forehead and turned back to the hard-jawed man at the lone desk in the barren room.

"Mr. Wirth," I said briskly, "time is cash in the trucking business and you're tying up my rig. You ordered this furniture and the company down in Los Angeles shipped it. Let's find a place to put it."

Wirth looked me over carefully, like a loan shark appraising a potential victim. Beads of perspiration glistened under his thinning hair, but the fingers idly turning his gold pen were calm and steady. He waved an arm toward the empty space around him.

"We're not ready for the tables yet. There's carpet to lay and—"

"You were ready a few minutes ago," I countered quickly. "When I came in here you gave your men orders to stack the stuff along one side. And suddenly you change. Why?"

"I'll pay for your time," he said easily. "Add it to the bill. But we can't take the furnishings off your truck until we're ready. Tomorrow, maybe."

He leaned back and gave me the personality treatment—a professional smile right off your televi-

sion screen. The sign lettered across the glass in front said JAKE WIRTH'S PLACE in letters a foot high and, by the looks of the joint he was setting up, Wirth had plenty gold. Solid mirrors made up the walls along both sides, and neatly spaced above the glass were some of the finest etchings you're likely to run across. Even a trucker could see they'd been turned out by a practiced



hand. Except for his desk and chair, the floors were bare. An extension cord led from the phone back through a leather-upholstered door to what would be the office when the painters finished. A short dark-haired man in loose tweeds leaned against the mirror next to the door, a preoccupied look on his face. I swung back to Wirth for another try.

"It isn't that easy," I said. "I can't homestead in Reno until they finish your place. This job is an extra for me—up on Saturday and back to L. A. on Sunday, home in time to hit my regular contract runs Monday morning. So I gotta roll, Mr. Wirth."

"The tables stay right where they are." His jaw snapped shut and behind him the jerk leaning against the mirror straightened and slid away from the glass. Then, almost as if it were an effort, Wirth smiled and stood up. He was as smooth as a well-fed salesman could be. The stickpin in his tie had a horseshoe of diamonds set in ebony and the design was repeated in miniature in his ring. His hair was combed carefully to make maximum use of what remained, and it was neatly barbered around the edges. He was making a point of being likeable, but I still wasn't sold. I don't like guys who tie up my truck. I don't care much for men who change their minds too often, either.

Wirth made a show of reading the name lettered across the door of my rig. "Matt Brady Trucking Company, eh? And is that a shamrock I see under your sign? Well, Matt, you just take it slow and easy for awhile. I ordered delivery, but I can't take it off your truck. So I have to pay—that's business." He came around the desk and put a friendly hand on my shoulder. "We'll get you out tomorrow maybe."

"The delay time on that outfit is pretty steep," I said. I wasn't smiling; I didn't want him to think he could kiss me off with a couple of bucks an hour. "If it runs to hotel bills and meals—"

"Sure. Sure thing. It's all deductible from the cut Uncle Sam takes. And speaking of meals, I'll buy lunch just to show you there's no hard feelings. I've a phone call to make—want to get those boys right over to lay the carpet—and then we'll go. Fair enough?"

There wasn't much I could do. Wirth went back to another office to make his call and I began to wonder what was the matter with the phone on his desk. I'm a big boy now. What could he tell a rug company that wouldn't be right for my ears? I looked at the phone, then at the guy in the tweeds. Next I pulled up the sleeve of my shirt and made like a man looking for the time.

"What number do you dial for the time of day?" I asked him as I picked up the telephone receiver.

He pulled a flashy pocket watch, snapped the face cover open, and gave me the cold eye. "Noon. On the dot."

"Thanks," I said, and dropped the receiver back on the cradle. But I'd heard the buzz—there wasn't a thing wrong with the phone on the desk.

We ate at the Silver King, an extravaganza of chrome and colored glass which sported the usual assortment of crap tables in the center, ranks of one-arm bandits down one side, and some blackjack tables along the other. Jake Wirth and I sat at the counter and I'd eaten halfway through my sandwich before I noticed that a hunk of blonde fluff dealing blackjack was looking my way. I looked back. Wirth ordered pie for us and we went through that, but in between bites I kept sneaking a peek at the babe and wondering if maybe I shouldn't try my luck at cards.

Wirth winked at me and nodded her way. "Cute, huh?"

I didn't answer. Somewhere a voice whispered caution. Maybe I'm not overly ugly, but it's for sure I never hung up any records as a lady-killer. A guy tries to keep a neat outfit. That's business. Mine is a green shirt and pants that match and I keep them clean, but let's face it—they're strictly for work. The chauffeur's license pinned to my cap said quite plainly that I wasn't an executive. If a dame wanted to dig a little, the diamond stickpin next to me was a lot better picking than I could offer.

Then I glanced at Wirth's thinning hair and excess poundage and told myself that maybe the blonde liked them Irish. I began to work on a way to excuse myself from the counter, because that babe making with the cards and the come-on was something special. Her blue eyes, along with a trace of freckles, gave her that trim, fresh look. The house uniform, a satin edition of what the dude-ranch cowgirl with a million bucks would wear, did a lot for her and, of course, she did plenty for the uniform. She knew what to do with a lipstick and, more important, what not to do with it. And she might trip, but she'd never fall flat on her face—if you know what I mean.

Someone handed Jake Wirth a note. He glanced at it, then signaled the waiter.

"Put both lunches on my bill," he said. And then to me, "Sorry, Brady. I'll have to get back to my place right away. Come by in the morning."

He gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder then and left.

I flashed a look toward the card game and caught the blonde's eyes. Sometimes it's there. You've seen it now and then—everyone has. Maybe she's sitting across from you in a subway or bus. Maybe you see her for a few seconds when the light comes on in a show. Or she

might be in a car beside yours waiting for a light to change and you know that you'll never meet in a hundred years, but the instant that your eye holds hers there is a leaping spark, a quickening of the pulse and you're both aware that it's there.

For the blonde and Matt Brady, the spark was alive.

I slipped a sawbuck out of my wallet and slid off the lunch-counter stool. It had been some time, but I thought I could hold my own in a blackjack game. I found a place at the end of her table.

"Ten," I said. She stacked five, matched it, and poked the paper money down the slot in the table. She dealt nimbly. And when a hand broke, she scooped the loser's bet into the tray and folded his cards under in one smooth sweep. I put two bucks on the table for the next deal. When the cards came around, I raised the corner of the top one and saw a K. I slid it over and checked the bottom. An ace! Blackjack, my first hand! I flipped the cards over.

"Nice start."

She said it casually and pushed a stack of three silver dollars my way. And once again I got the feeling that the look in her eye was above and beyond the call of duty.

"Keep 'em coming," I grinned.

What happened to me in that session of blackjack should happen more often. Only maybe I couldn't take too much of it because playing in a fixed game is a little hard on the nerves—even when things are stacked in reverse. That's right. I caught it about twenty minutes after I sat down. I played a lot of cards when I did a stretch in the service and a guy just naturally keeps tab on what's been dealt. The game was going along, the blonde giving me an eye now and then as she had from the very first. Then I split a pair of aces for one card down on each. My first was a queen. When I raised the corner of the other for a peek, it was the ten of diamonds.

And the ten of diamonds had just busted a hand down the line. I glanced at it again, then checked the other players. They weren't looking at me, so I risked one long tight look at the blonde's face. Her left eyelid came down just a fraction of an inch and stayed there an instant—half a wink, a silent message that she was for me and to hell with the house.

There's a little larceny in all of us, they say—that eternal yen to get something for nothing. The call of the fast buck. I settled back to milk this one for all the law—or the babe dealing—would allow. I raised my bets to five and she smiled at me. My hand still won almost every time. Then I went up to ten and the cutie with the cards lifted an eyebrow. Too strong. I went back to five. But I kept winning—winning like you do in one

of those wonderful dreams where money rolls around your feet ankle-deep. At five bucks a hand, she was paying me off in the small brown chips embossed with a silver king and a number. Little by little I kept working them off the table and into my pockets, to keep the stack from getting high enough to attract attention.

It went like that until almost six o'clock. I'd lose one now and then, but over the long haul those brown chips in my pocket were getting to be quite a bulge. Then the blonde started looking at her watch. The third time she peeked at the thing I caught on.

"Where's a good place to eat in Reno?" I asked the gent on my left. He didn't answer until the cards were out. Then he checked his hand, pushed them into the square, and piled his money on top signifying he was holding.

"Two blocks down and a half over," he said, his thumb jerking in the general direction of east. "Place called Slagle's."

"Thanks. Guess I'll give it a try, after a bit."

The babe dealing didn't bat an eye. In fact, she ignored our little conversation so carefully that I knew she'd be there. It would be interesting to find out what kind of cut she expected. When her relief took over, the blonde disappeared through the employees' door. I played four more hands and it cost me twenty bucks. Then I slipped off the stool, went to the cashier's cage, and stacked my chips at the window. They paid me off in the green—an even four hundred and twenty clams. With the silver dollars I'd stashed away, the kick went up another twenty-seven. I walked out feeling like Dillinger.

2.

A few minutes later, I leaned against the plate-glass front of Slagle's, blew smoke into the warm evening breeze, and watched the blonde fluff coming toward me. When she was close enough to hear a real low wolf whistle, I gave her one. She winked that halfway wink of hers and smiled.

"Wow!" I said.

"You like it?" She wasn't being coy, but a tinge of pink came into her cheeks. They're wearing them all over this year, I guess—a thin nylon blouse and a slip out of the same stuff so that a lacy bra shows up to good advantage. On her it wasn't wasted. She linked her arm through mine and we went into the grill. The booth was on the side—of leatherette, and real cozy. A waitress dropped two menus and went her way.

I said, "I'm Matt Brady. I like to start with chilled wine—then steak."

She smiled. "My name is Margaret Blake—Maggie for short. I don't think I could improve on cold wine followed by a steak."

"Sky's the limit," I grinned. Then I looked around like a guy who's going to part with a deep dark secret. I leaned toward her. "Just cleaned up in a blackjack game down the street, babe," I said out of the side of my mouth. "Over four hunnert fish. Let's go first class."

She smiled again and already it was doing things to me. Even before the wine came I felt a warm glow rising within. We took care of the unimportant pleasantries over the sparkling glass. Then the steaks arrived, broiled crisp and brown on the outside, and still kicking on the inside. By the time they cleared away the main dishes, we'd gotten down to our little hopes in life. She knew that the Matt Brady Trucking Company was my chief interest as well as my bread and butter. I learned that she'd dealt in the Silver King for over a year.

"You like the work?" I asked.

"The hours are good. Bart Akers—he's our boss at the King—isn't bad to work for. The pay's good, too."

"And the future?"

She hesitated on that one. "No. No future in dealing blackjack. And I've thought about that, Matt. My sister in L. A. is always asking me to come down there and take a job in something more stable. Maybe I will sometime, but I don't know. I sort of like Reno."

"It must be a fast life," I admitted. Then I said: "This Jake Wirth—you know him?"

"I know who he is. He doesn't know me, but he comes into the King now and then."

The cutest dame in the place and Wirth didn't know her? Maybe she was being modest about that, but she said he came in now and then. You don't run a charge account in a place you patronize once in a while. Charge account? Hell, Wirth hadn't even signed a tab. Just said "put it on the bill" and walked out. I drummed the table, then reached for cigarettes—always good for a stall while you think things out. I tapped the bottom of the pack, offered a smoke to Maggie, then snapped my lighter and put flame to our smokes.

Something wasn't on balance, like a truck with one low tire. Someone wasn't leveling with Matt Brady, and her name was Blake. I blew smoke toward the ceiling, looked across the table.

"Look, cookie," I grinned. "Let's get down to dollars, shall we? You tell me the cut and we'll split the take. Then—"

"No cut, Matt. You won it. It's yours."

"Then what's the angle, Maggie?"

"Does there have to be one?"

The ashes on my cigarette were getting long. I did something about that and that took a little time. When I looked up, the blonde's eyes caught mine and held on.

I said, "I think there has to be one, Maggie. Take the first hundred truckers you see on any highway. Keep the seven that look a little Irish and let the rest go. Now line up the seven and take the one in the middle. That's Matt Brady—strictly average in money, marbles, and all the rest. I'm not going to add a lot of drivel to the stuff you must hear every day. Let's just say I couldn't wear this license on my hat unless I could see well enough to drive, so I know where you stand in the line. You're not in front of the guy in the middle."

She laughed.

"And the angle we were talking about?"

"Matt, you won that money! Any other way would be—would be pretty bad for me. I mean if Bart Akers found out."

"Okay. I won it. But just between the pair of us—why?"

She ground out her cigarette and this time she didn't look at me. "Maybe I like one of the seven. Maybe I like the one in the middle."

That stopped it. I couldn't push it any farther without fishing for a bucket of compliments. She made a quick but expert repair job on her lips, snapped shut her bag, and we stood up. I dropped a bill to cover the tab and started for the door. But we didn't make it.

We didn't make it because about half-way there Maggie's slender fingers clamped tightly around my arm and she stopped short.

"Matt!"

I glanced at her frightened face, then followed the line of her vision to a sedan along the curb. The husky looking our way wasn't making any effort to get out of his car.

"Matt! He's from the Silver King. He's one of Bart Akers' men."

"Maybe he's hungry," I said and tried a small laugh.

"Don't joke, Matt. We—we might have stepped into something."

I turned her around casually and we started toward the rear exit. Her fingers hadn't loosened any and I could hear the tight breathing in her throat. We slipped through a door marked EMPLOYEES, hesitated long enough to spot the door ahead of us and picked up speed again. Through a screen door, past a line of tall refuse cans and we were in the alley—and facing a tough gent who blocked our way. He stood with his feet apart and a sardonic grin on his ugly mug, heavy arms folded across his chest.

"Going somewhere, Maggie?"

She gasped. I didn't say anything; he wasn't here to talk. My left hand came over and gently worked Maggie's fingers off my arm.

"Bart wants to see you, kid. You and this smart lug here."

I led with a short hard right to

his breadbasket, heard the grunt of pain, and started a full throttle left to his jaw. But halfway there, the left weakened and fell ineffectually on his shoulder. I was pitching toward the dirty concrete and the lights were going out. Meanwhile, I smelled kitchen grease and motor oil and the alley felt hard against my face. Then there was nothing.

Now, it felt like the floor of a car. I didn't stir, just lay still as I tried to pick up the thread of events. But before I could get everything ironed out the car stopped. I closed my eyes again and waited. Someone got my knees, another man my arms. We bumped through a door and they dumped me unceremoniously on a soft carpet. I heard water running out of a tap, moaned, twisted a little, and opened my eyes.

"Get up, mister."

I struggled to my knees. The blonde sat in a big chair, a handkerchief pressed to her face. Three of those present were overdressed and a little too tough. Hats pulled down. They could have been three torpedoes, some holdovers from the gangster years. Behind an outsized oak desk, a fat hunk of suet in a gray pinstripe tilted back in his chair and eyed me with distinct distaste. He had two extra chins and a flabby lip. When he spoke, his eyes snapped.

"I said, 'Get up!' All the way up, mister."

The pain in my head wasn't eased by standing, but I made it. I ran fingers gingerly over the back of my noggin and found the tender spot. The fat one leaned toward me, his fat hands flattening out on the glass-topped desk.

"I ain't even going to ask 'Did you do it?' mister," he said sourly. "My boys saw it all. I don't know how long it went on, but I know it did go on and that's enough for me. And I ain't a bit happy about it. Understand?" He finished with a glare, then turned toward Maggie. "What'd I ever do to deserve this?" he asked harshly. "I pay same wages as any other joint in Reno. I treat the dealers right. Ain't no payoff after hours connected with workin' for Bart Akers; nobody chases you around the tables after closing-time. Ain't that so, Maggie?"

"Cut the hearts and flowers," I said. I was feeling better and didn't want the kid to take any more guff than she had to. Even another working-over would be better than letting Akers rant at the blonde. "So I corrupted one of your dealers. I got her to throw me a few bucks out of the Silver King. And now you're broke, that it? A couple of hundred and the King is cleaned out. Jeez!"

That brought the fat boy's attention back to me in a hurry. The thin jerk holding the glass of water threw it at my head. He opened the side of his face and said, "Let me smear this joker, Bart."

I beat the boss to a reply. "You got a deal, tough guy. Toss your gun on the desk and I'll try you for size."

"Shut up!" It was fat-boy again, only now he had lunged to his feet, his face the color of a split beet. He glared across the desk at the pair of us. "We're wasting time. I run this show." Then he swung back to the blonde. "You're through. Not just the King; you're through in Reno. Get out of town. Get out by tomorrow noon. I'll personally look up your address in the employees' file and check to see that you're out of wherever the hell you live. Understand?"

Maggie nodded, her eyes down, the handkerchief still pressed tightly against her face.

"And you, mister—we won't be needing you any more either. I don't give a damn when you leave town, but stay out of the Silver King. You hear me, boy? Stay away from my place."

Before I could get in any deeper, Maggie got up and came over to me. Her fingers found my arm. "Come on, Matt. We'd better go." Her voice was low and a little scared. She was right, of course. We'd played with fire and we were getting off with only a small burn.

Akers sat behind his desk, a nasty scowl on his thick face. Two of his hired help ranged behind him. The other, the thin jerk with the side-of-the-mouth talk and an over-tough look was leaning against the door. He didn't move.

"Let them out, Varney." It was the boss speaking from behind us, but Varney had to give us one more sneer. I worked my arm free of Maggie's hand and Akers saw me do it.

"Varney!" he snapped out.

Hard-boiled moved over to let us pass.

3.

The blonde had a second-floor apartment and a cool evening breeze was beginning to roll in from the desert. We sat on the lounge, a couple of empty coffee cups on the glass-topped table in front of us. I leaned back and tried to see how things had been and what thread ran through the whole thing that tied it all together. Wirth was holding up my truck. A blonde tossed four hundred bucks my way in a crooked card game and we were caught. She lost her job.

"I'm sorry as hell about your job, Maggie—"

"Thanks, Matt. Thanks, but we both know where we stand. It was nice of you to take the blame back in Akers' office. I'll always remember that, Matt. But this one was really on me all the way. I started it; you didn't. Your head feel all right?"

Her soft hand came over my shoulder and stopped at my neck, her fingers gently working along the side of my face. I met her eyes

and tried to read what lay underneath. She had started it, of course. But why?

"About the money, Maggie." I laid the bills on the glass-topped table and stacked the silver dollars on top. "It's over four hundred. You keep it, Maggie. I guess Bart Akers didn't strip it off of us because he couldn't risk possible claims that he strong-armed someone to get the winnings back. It's yours."

"No, Matt."

"Sure," I grinned. "I've got my trucking business and you're fresh out of a job. Take the stuff. I'll settle for the lesson I learned." I stroked the top of my head. "Lucky I got a hard one."

"Matt, I can't." Her hand was working at my neck again. "Some things you do for money and some you don't. If I took the cash, Matt, I'd be a cheap chiseler and it didn't start that way. Not really. I saw you sitting with Wirth and—I don't know, Matt—somehow I wanted you to win."

"What'll you do now? That sister in L. A.?"

"I may as well. I've been wanting to see her. Maybe this does it. Maybe it's a good thing, really, because there doesn't seem to be very much of a future in dealing—"

"Look, Maggie," I said quickly, "I'll be making the run back to Los Angeles as soon as Jake Wirth gets his junk off my truck. Why not hold down the other side of the cab? It isn't exactly Pullman, but I keep a clean rig and I'd be tickled pink to have company."

"Why, Matt. I think that's a perfectly sweet idea." Her lips parted in the breathless air of a girl who's just been invited to a prom. Only as I remember my school days, not many babes were surprised by a bid to the big moment. Most of them worked long and hard to get the right boy to ask. And I got the feeling all at once that the blonde beside me hadn't been nearly as surprised as she might have been by the idea of going south with Matt Brady. Once again I sensed that things were slipping out of control, like a loaded truck on an ice-glazed street. I needed time. There were smokes in a tiny box on the coffee table. I lit two and held one out to the blonde.

"It's a deal," I said. What else could I say?

"I'll pack in the morning," she was saying. "Two suitcases and my little radio—that's all I have."

There wasn't anything else to settle. I covered her hand with mine. She didn't move it. She was curled up on the sofa, her feet drawn up under her with only a small ankle and one high-heeled shoe showing from under the filmy nylon skirt. The effect was more than perfect. Everything was wonderful—except there were so many things happening so fast I didn't know where I stood.

Our eyes met and that spark

danced between them. And suddenly it didn't matter that the pieces in this little puzzle were badly scrambled. It didn't matter that the beautiful blonde seemed to weave in and out among them like a bright strand in the pattern of a rag rug. We leaned toward each other at the same time, our lips pressing together, our arms locking around each other.

"Matt—you shouldn't have gotten mixed up with me. Why did it have to be you, Matt?"

I didn't answer, just held her close. For a long time we were like that; then Maggie broke it and drew back. "We better take it easy, Matt," she said.

"Sure, kid." I got up and went to the open window and let the night air wash over me. When I turned back, I had things under control. I grinned. "You don't have to work your passage south, Maggie. I'll be here as soon as Wirth clears my truck. Ten, maybe, or a little after. We'll be out of Reno by eleven; hit L. A. before midnight sometime." Then I found my cap, walked to the door, and opened it. But the beautiful cardsharp came over and put her hand on the door. She slipped in between, the half-open door behind her, her hands on my shoulders.

"It isn't like that, Matt. I—"

"Suppose you tell me just how it is," I said. "There's so much I don't know about—"

She stood on tiptoe, her arms sliding all the way around my neck. I kissed her full on the mouth, her lips soft and trembling under mine. I heard her shoe touch the wood behind her. The door clicked shut.

At eight in the morning I leaned against my truck in front of Jake Wirth's Place and waited for the lord of the manor to show. I'd phoned, and he'd said he would be right down, and his voice had been something less than cordial. I drew on a cigarette and wondered if the gambling barons had a grapevine, and if so was it fast enough to have taken the word to Jake about last night's affair at the Silver King. When I saw Wirth striding along the street, his square jaw set in an even more rigid angle than usual, I knew he'd heard from Akers all right.

Wirth looked at me with apprehension. "Hell of a note, Brady," he said briefly. Then he opened the door and we went in among the mirrors, etchings, and fresh paint. No carpets. "You managed to get into a peck of trouble after I left you yesterday, Brady."

"And how about you getting that truck unloaded, Wirth—"

"We'll get to that. Now on that lousy double deal you and that blonde worked on Bart, we don't like that kind of thing in Reno, Brady. In fact, we don't stand for it." He gave me a cold look, tossed his hat on the bare desk,

and went on a tour of his hall. If he expected me to follow along and explain, he was in for a surprise. I went across to the other side, looked in the mirror, and brushed a piece of lint off my green shirt. Then I looked up. to see what the etchings had to offer. The name in the lower right hand corner caught my eye: Wirth. I moved to the next, although there wasn't much point in it. It was plain they'd all been done by the same person, and very well done. By Wirth.

I went back to the desk and parked my fanny on the glass top. A talented man, Wirth. Etchings. Setting up a first-class gambling joint. Sharp operator. Just a rough diamond with a lot of facets. And choosy about which phone he uses when he calls someone to talk about carpets. I smoked and waited.

"We'll get you unloaded right away, Brady," he said casually. He sat down in his desk chair, looked up at me, and then got right up and went into his small office in back. When he returned, he had a chair for me. Jake Wirth didn't like people sitting high enough to look down on him, apparently.

"I've got Joe out rounding up some workmen—ought to be here any minute. The quicker you clear Reno the better."

"News travels fast," I said.

"We manage. Anybody runs a roust on one of us, we pass the word along. The thing that makes me sore, Brady, is that I brought you into Bart's place. In a way I was going good for you and—"

"Save the tears," I cut in. "You don't need a sponsor to get into a card game in Reno. Anybody with dough in his jeans can walk into the Silver King, put his cash on the table and his keister on a cushion. They'll deal him a hand. What's hurting you Wirth? You got a piece of the King?"

His jaw dropped open, then closed. He eyed me shrewdly. "Hell, no. It's just that—"

"Then stop screaming."

He rubbed a fist into the palm of his other hand. Then the old personality smile worked its way across his face. He was trying awfully hard to get along with Matt Brady. I had deliberately needled him. He wasn't the kind to take anything from anyone, but he was taking it now. I tried to figure why.

Joe turned out to be the same dark-haired gent I'd seen yesterday, but in a different set of tweeds. He had four assorted down-at-the-heel stumblebums in tow, ones he'd culled from the hanger-on list, I guessed. All we got from Joe was a lot of impractical suggestions, but the boys he'd found for the work were pretty anxious to collect their cash and get to a table, so we made out. When I swung the doors shut and locked my truck, I figured the bill and took it in to Wirth. He raised an eyebrow.

"Considering the cash you sucked out of the Silver King, you got a lot of crust nicking me for delay," he said sourly.

"Like you said yesterday—you ordered it and couldn't take it off my truck. You pay—that's business. And you'll deduct it from the cut Uncle Sam takes."

"Sure, but—"

"Would you have paid my losses if I'd gone to the cleaners, Wirth?"

His jaw muscles tightened. Then he relaxed and reached for his check book. I watched him write, his fingers holding the pen lightly, the words coming out smooth and round and as beautiful as any you've ever seen in the movies, when you get a close-up of someone writing a note. I glanced at the etchings on the wall, then back to the check. Jake Wirth had one hell of a pair of hands.

He got up and followed me out to my truck, his bird-dog Joe right behind him. I climbed up.

"Matt, damn if I don't admire the speed you made picking up the blonde and getting her to throw Akers' dough your way," he told me. "It must have been a smooth operation. But don't try a repeat on that. I'm telling you like a friend, Matt. Bart's not a bit amused about this. And if some other house was to run into it, the association here would consider you a major menace to the business. You—you get my point, Brady?"

"If that's meant in kindness, I'm obliged, Jake," I said. "Don't worry. I won't do what I did again."

Wirth waved. The smile on his face was something I didn't like. Joe wore one that could have been a carbon copy and I didn't like it any better. The last time some men looked at me like that I wound up with assorted cuts and bruises and a brief nap on cold steel. . .

My mind rolled back to my hitch during the war. Our communications outfit was aboard a Navy LST bound west for Saipan. We were bored, I guess. I got into a hassle with one of the white hats in the crew—those little arguments that get bigger and bigger. When it got down to the "let's settle this" stage and we started for the ring they had roped off down on the tank deck, the gobs in the ship's company began giving me that sheep-to-the-slaughter look. But I'd mixed it up a time or two and figured I could get by as well as the next guy. We laced on the mitts and someone rang a bell. A short three rounds later the sailor put me away and it was a kindness, because what was happening to Matt Brady shouldn't happen to anyone—even to pros getting maybe twenty thousand bucks for their licking. It turned out this gob was runner-up to the light-heavy champ of the Pacific Fleet. After the bloodshed, the boys were downright complimentary about my staying into the third, but I still remember the sad looks they gave

me while the white hat and I were getting ready to tangle.

I still remember the lumps I took, too. And now Jake and his right-hand man were wearing the same "too bad, sucker" expression.

4.

Maggie was waiting when I rolled the big job up to the curb and went up to her apartment. She was ready for travel, her long golden hair set off by a ribbon the color of Kelly's tie on March 17th. She'd passed up slacks in favor of something cool and low-cut. Her luggage wasn't in sight and there was a hint of hesitation in the smile of greeting on her face. Stacked on the little coffee table in front of the sofa, exactly where I'd left it, was the bundle of twenties weighted down by the small mound of silver dollars. I nodded.

"Pretty generous tip for the maid, isn't it?"

"Matt, I—You don't have to be bothered with me on your trip back to L. A.," she said, her eyes not meeting mine.

"Bothered! I've been looking forward all—"

"Matt—" She came toward me, those deep blue eyes slowly searching my face and when she stood next to me I put my arms around her and she leaned back. "Matt, I want to tell you how I feel about us." Her hands left my shoulders and very gently their palms were placed over my eyes, her interlaced fingers resting on the bridge of my nose. The heels of her hands were cool along the side of my face and she had my vision completely blocked.

"You've got to take the money, Matt. Any other way would spoil things, would change me from a girl who happened to like a guy, into a money-grabbing little cheat. Will you take it, Matt?"

"Sure. And now—"

"Wait. There's something else. I don't want you to think you have to take me to Los Angeles. If I felt you thought you had to just because of—of last night, I'd feel awful. I mean that would make me something else I don't want to be, and—"

I stopped the flow of words exactly like any other guy with half an ounce of sense would. It wound up in a first-class clinch. When we broke, the smile on her face was strictly what the gent had in mind when he composed the song about "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

"All right now?" I asked. "Shall we go?"

She became all business. "Sure, Matt. There's an overnight bag and a suitcase in the kitchen." Maggie picked up her little leather-bound portable radio and her purse and we went down the hall. With all the space behind the seat, there wasn't any point in letting her baggage bounce around back in the van. I boosted the pair back

out of the way, then set her little radio on top and helped her up. I hit the starter and we pulled out.

"We're on our way, Maggie. No more worries?"

She patted my arm. "No, Matt. No worries."

The first part of the trip I like to remember. Just the first couple of hundred miles from Reno down to Bishop—before I began to notice the tail we were wearing.

North of Bishop everything was wonderful. Empty, the big job cruised smoothly along, her Diesel turning over with the steady consistency of an expensive watch. The blonde was the cutest trick that ever graced the cab—and a great traveling companion besides. No breathless questions followed by obvious inattention while you raved on. No school-girl giggles at every other word. Just two adults who were getting up in their twenties and not trying to impress anyone. If losing her job at the Silver King was important to her, she kept it hidden. The talk was easy and relaxed. In Carson City I pulled off at a trucker's service station to take on fuel.

"Coffee, Maggie?"

She hesitated and took a careful look around. Then she nodded toward a little cafe, linked an arm through mine, and said, "Sure. Let's try this one and we can keep an eye on the suitcases."

We had pie and coffee and went back to the truck refreshed. I rigged the desert air-cooler and hosed it up with water. We were on our way again. The wind over the wasteland was getting set for the heat of the day, but a tug on the cord leading out of the cooler rolled the evaporation drum halfway over and cooled the cab nicely. A mile or two slipped by. I noticed the blonde looking at me with an odd expression.

"Matt. I—I'll bet your married."

"Bad guess. But what brought it to mind?"

"There's something about you—your easy sort of way. You're used to having a girl around."

I laughed. "Four sisters, three of them older. I had to get used to it. And you?"

She didn't say anything. She didn't say a word and I felt my fingers tighten on the wheel. I paid careful attention to rolling the truck down the highway, but suddenly the breeze had spilled out of my sails and I realized I'd been counting a lot on seeing Maggie when she settled in L. A. Great big dreams, but—

"I must have figured wrong," I said softly. "But you got no ring. Where's he hiding?"

Her hand stole along the green cloth on my sleeve and covered my knuckles on the steering wheel.

"He didn't come back, Matt. He didn't come back from a little island in the Pacific called Iwo Jima." She said it without bitterness. A simple statement of fact that

said more than a big, long speech could have. She'd learned to live with it. She could talk about it.

But I didn't ask her to. I brought the conversation around to blackjack, how she'd learned about it.

She smiled a warm, bright smile and I was glad to see things back on a lighter level. "Just picked it up, Matt. It wasn't a bad job. Probably not too different from dealing soup plates in somebody's greasy spoon. In fact, I know it isn't; I've done that too." She leaned back. "I do run on, don't I? What about you, Matt? Your lessons didn't start in the Silver King."

"Had four years practice," I grinned, "with Uncle Sam to feed me if I happened to go broke."

"What branch?"

"Army. Signal corps. After basic I latched onto an outfit working communications for beachheads. Tough a couple of times a year, but in between there were long stretches where we didn't do much besides tune up equipment, replace tubes and batteries, and play cards. We overdid it; I seldom care for cards now."

It went on like that for quite a spell, batting it back and forth from past to present and the like. We pushed along steadily and crossed into California just out of Topaz Lake. Being a truck, we had to roll in for a check-up. I swung the doors on the empty van; they took a quick peek and we were on our way again. We made Bishop and Maggie read the city-limits sign on the way in. We stopped for chow and once again she was very much concerned that we be able to watch the truck as we ate.

"You got gold in those suitcases?" I kidded.

"The Blake bankroll isn't enormous but I'd hate to lose the few things I have."

I didn't think any more about it, but when we pulled out onto the highway and left Bishop the blonde mentioned the name again. She said it real clear, like an adult teaching a child to pronounce it.

"Bishop. Nice town, Bishop."

"Sure," I agreed, and shot a quick glance her way, "but it gets awful hot here and—"

She pointed at a kid off in the distance, galloping bareback on an old red horse, and changed the subject. We picked up a little speed and I checked the side mirror like a trucker will, just seeing how things stand. It was Sunday and some of the weekend tourists were headed home. There'd be a lot more of them as we closed in on L. A.

I didn't notice anything special —not at first, I didn't. Then I picked up a car quite a way back, one that seemed to hang on back there. The gleam on its chrome grill was pretty bright and it made a pattern. Only it didn't get bigger and bigger in the rearview mirror and then flash past like they usually do. Just flashed in and out

of sight from time to time. The car was chugging along at the forty-five and fifty I held. I glanced at the blonde, but if she knew she gave no sign. We scooted along mile after mile, the endless strip of gray concrete passing under us. The car with all the chrome was still with us when Lone Pine loomed ahead.

"Matt—is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?"

I'd said it too quickly. Maggie gave me a reproachful look. "You haven't said much lately," she said.

I forced a big grin. "Just thinking about another cup of coffee or maybe something cool. Let's stop in Lone Pine."

She nodded. I let the needle drop to forty; the car behind showed and began to close. Then it held off and stayed its distance. I shaved another five off the speed, but the driver was wised up and cut down, way down. He stayed out of sight a little while. In Lone Pine I would know for sure. I wheeled into the first place we came to and we got down for cokes. She watched the truck as we drank, but not me. I kept tab on the stretch of highway down which we had come. He didn't show. He'd stayed out in the heat rather than run abreast of us in town.

Now I could quit worrying about whether or not he was tagging us. I could start wondering, instead, who in hell it was and what he found so attractive about the stern of Matt Brady's truck.

On the way out Maggie read the town's name.

"Lone Pine. Is Lone Pine another hot one, Matt?"

"Sure. They're all hot on this run. Will be until we hit the coast."

For the next hundred miles, I dealt light conversation off the top of my mind—the serious business at hand being right under the surface all the while. I couldn't forget that car that had been on my tail. I had to know something about what was going on. I couldn't ask the girl; she could be in the thing or out, but either way it wouldn't help to ask her. The four hundred dollars I took from Bart Akers' Silver King could be ruled out. If they had wanted the dough, they could have forced matters last night in their office. In fact, they had been careful not to mention the return of their cash. I kept turning it over and over, and I still hadn't the remotest idea whether it was the Wirth or the Akers side of the puzzle back there.

The town of Mojave lay ahead. "Rest-stop, Maggie," I said. "You can freshen up while I take on oil. Then I'll let you stand guard duty."

She nodded. Only this time I had no intention of keeping our little playmates out in the heat. This time I was going to let them come right on into town.

5.

I cruised along through the outskirts of Mojave and almost to the far end of the short main street, eased into a filling station, and checked the rearview. The big car was just holing up in a station two blocks back and on the other side. He could keep track of me from there. I waited until Maggie came back, then climbed down and went around the end of the building marked MEN. But I kept right on going. Once out of sight of my truck, I sped down the alley on the double. Two blocks, then a left turn and I casually eased down the half block toward the highway. I wondered who it would be—Akers' hired hands, or Wirth's.

When I got a peek at the big car, I worked a little farther along until I saw the man behind the wheel. It was Joe—Wirth's bird-dog, the boy in the fancy tweeds. I turned my back to light a smoke and think. It was Wirth's idea, then. He'd held me up for some reason he'd never told me, because he wasn't any more prepared to unload the stuff on Sunday morning than he was on Saturday afternoon. But he had let me go Sunday. He'd all but kissed me good-bye. I blew a cloud of smoke and took a second look. I saw Varney climbing into the car on the other side!

I started back to my rig, the way I'd come. Joe and Varney—together. So Wirth and Bart Akers were running hand in hand. Sure, Wirth could say "put it on the bill" and walk out. He probably owned part—maybe most or all—of the Silver King.

That put Maggie in on the ground floor. I'd suckered in all the way. The phony card game. The big act where Matt Brady tried to play hero and got a crimp in his skull. And all the time the blonde had been making those eyes of hers do tricks, it had been just a game.

It wasn't hard to see now. Wirth keeping me in Reno just long enough to steer me into the blonde. Some sleight of hand and the girl ordered out of town—but not before she'd laid the ground work about a sister in L. A. And even if I hadn't suggested her coming with me, she could have angled it so I would. But why?

Why did Jake and Bart Akers groom a trucker down with four hundred clams and a doll and send him on his way to Los Angeles? The van was empty; I'd opened it at the State-line inspection. Only the girl and her things were on board. She could have gone by train. She could have been in that car two blocks behind my rig. Why didn't they take the girl and her two suitcases in their car?

I stopped on that and lit another smoke. Any way you looked at it there was only one answer. Whatever it was I carried, it was too hot

to handle. They could ride along behind to keep tab, but they didn't want to be caught with it. That left a reasonable doubt on the blonde. If they didn't want to bring it to L. A., she probably wouldn't want to either.

Maybe she wasn't all the way in. I wanted to believe that. I'd been so sure about that spark between us. So sure. And when I pulled myself up into the cab, before rolling out of Mojave with our escort, I looked long and steadily into Maggie's face.

I still wanted to believe she wasn't really selling me out.

For another seventy-five miles I tried to smile in the right places, and it must have been fairly successful because Maggie didn't seem to know I'd caught wise. I kept hoping it was the other way, that she knew less about things than I did—but in San Fernando we came to the payoff.

"Mind stopping for a minute, Matt? I'd like to pick up some aspirin. I'll find a phone book at the same time and call my sister to tell her I'm in town. All right?"

"Sure." I said it with a grin, but I was going to watch this one closer than a load-limit inspector checking the scales under your wheel. I found a double-parking slot and worked the truck over to the curb.

"Be just a sec," she called gayly.

There was a small drugstore right by the truck and she went in, then came out before she had had a chance to more than take a quick look around.

"They don't have an L. A. directory, Matt. I'll have to run back and try another store."

I nodded. As soon as she started up the street I hunched over on my side and put my face as close as I could to the big mirror. That expanded the field of view. It was like looking out the window, only my head wasn't sticking out of the cab. The blonde hurried along. About a block back, she hesitated for a careful look around. It looked like she nodded, but I wasn't sure, before she turned into a store.

A bit farther on a car door opened toward the curb. A man in tweeds slipped across the walk and followed Maggie into the shop. The glow of a streetlight caught him long enough to remove any doubt . . . the blonde was getting together with Jake Wirth's boy Joe.

Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I waited for her to come back, waited and chewed on the latest development. One thing for sure—nothing was sacred now. Anything I could do to upset the speed of this cannonball was fair enough. I felt behind me for her suitcase, but the lock didn't open. I'd need a key and Maggie never parted with her purse. But I had to know what I was carrying.

There'd have to be a way to get Maggie out, and still have the purse left in. I worked on that. Then I

got out and went back to the rear wheels and squatted down on the sidewalk to peek under the truck. I waited for Maggie to come.

"Something wrong, Matt?"

I didn't look up. I put my hand under and felt the hose coming down to the brake cylinder.

"What is it, Matt?"

"Air line. Plugged, I think. Can't use the brakes." Then I felt along the cylinder. "Maybe that'll do it," I said, and we climbed into the cab. I waited until she'd made herself comfortable and stowed her handbag. Then I reached under the dash and fiddled with nothing.

"No air." I looked at her as I said it and saw the first signs of worry creeping across her face. She put a hand to her long yellow hair and I thought she tried to check the mirror on what was happening behind us.

"Maggie, you know that length of hose coming down back there? The one I just had my hand on?" She nodded. "Now look," I went on slowly, "you watch the thing for me. You'll see it jump when the air blasts through. It'll jerk a little, like a garden hose when the water first comes on. Catch?"

"Yes, Matt, but—"

"Nothing to it," I cut in. "I'll work it free in a second and you'll see the hose move. Then we can go."

She climbed down and went back.

"Watching it?" I called.

"Yes, Matt."

"Move yet?" I asked, my hand grabbing her purse. She answered a slow "No" while I made a quick pass through her bag. No keys. I brought out a gun instead.

"She moving now?" I called, and she answered, "Not yet, Matt."

"Keep watching," I said.

I checked the gun, a little .25 automatic, a vest-pocket edition, but plenty dangerous up to a few yards. The truck cab is only a few feet—I couldn't allow this. I slid the clip free, then checked to make sure the chamber was empty. I dropped the bullets into my pocket and the gun back in her purse. Then I found the keys.

Moving fast, I hunched back toward the bags. She'd moved the little radio over by the open back window. I swung it down, slipped a key into the top suitcase, and raised the lid.

Green. Bales of green bills bound in packets with paper bands. They were twenties and I dared not think how much cash the suitcase represented. Involuntarily, my hand went to the smooth green paper. No use to open the other one. I was looking at more than enough dough to warrant knocking off a truck-driver when the time came. Brady was sure monkeying with a blowtorch this time!

Snapping the lid shut, I hoisted the leather radio back up, but the

nearly-hidden gleam of a tube caught my eye.

There'd been no music out of the thing. Not a note. I stalled for time again. "Maybe now," I called. "Keep an eye on it."

"How long is this going to take, Matt?"

"Hold on," I told her. "Just hold on, will yuh?"

I turned the radio quickly in my hands. Pressing the back down, I slipped it aside, but the works I saw were strictly not of the radio variety. Familiar to me, sure, but not radio. What I was holding was the chassis of a little walkie-talkie. I didn't remember the number. B—C something. We'd used them often enough during the war. Someone had stripped away the case and tailored the works into this little portable radio shell.

Now I knew why the blonde had been so careful to pronounce the names of towns. A play-by-play report. A progress check every time Matt Brady turned the wheel. Our tail couldn't have lost us if he'd tried. Not even at night.

We could do without any more of that kind of thing, too. I wrapped my fingers around the R-F amplifier tube, slipped it out, and replaced the back. Then I put her radio back on the miniature Fort Knox behind me and tramped on the brake pedal.

"Matt! It moved."

"Come on, Maggie," I called. "That does it. We're ready to roll." But we didn't roll, not right away. I didn't know which way to turn. I had to think. "We'll build up a little air," I said, my eyes glued to the dials.

They didn't need watching, but I needed some time. I realized now that the bundle of bills behind had never seen the government mint. There could only be one reason Wirth wasn't getting into the same car with the cash, for the trip south. That reason was twenty years on the rockpile. I thought about those etchings hanging on his walls. He was a master craftsman all right. The whole setup was plenty clear. He'd cut a set of plates and printed the phony twenties. A million dollars—two million, what did it matter? He'd picked a patsy, Matt Brady, to carry it down to a center of distribution. And Brady'd do the job for four hundred dollars and a smile—and maybe a hole in the head.

6.

I made one solid decision. We could do without the escort when I got to discussing things with Maggie. Traffic was pretty heavy when we pulled out into the stream. I eased along playing the lights, waiting for a break, the tail-car boxed in a block behind us.

Then Maggie Blake cracked up. She broke like a school kid jilted on the night of the big dance. We were riding along and suddenly

she threw herself across the cab, her arms going around me, her fingers digging into the flesh along my neck. I felt her body shudder. Hysterical sobs pulsed through her and big tears cascaded down the side of her face. Those bright red lips trembled and stayed half open, but never a sound came out, just the racking sobs as she clung to me. I slipped my free arm around her and half-heartedly tried to ease the strain; in the back of my mind was the idea that this was just another trick—something else to keep Brady off balance.

Only if this show wasn't the real McCoy, the kid next to me was wasting her time. She could have been among the top-ten actresses.

When the panic died away, I smoothed her hair. "Better now?"

"Better, Matt."

"You could tell me about it," I said softly.

"Sometime. I will, Matt, sometime. But we're close enough now. I can take a cab up to Mamie's house from here. So if you'll let me out, Matt, I'll—"

"We'll talk about it, Maggie," I grinned. An amber light flashed against us. I cruised into the intersection, swung right, and barreled away, leaving the black car in a block of tightly-packed cars. Next turn left, then a few more quick ones and I hit Victory Boulevard.

"Victory Boulevard!" She read it nice and clear. Go ahead, I thought. Shout it right into the thing, for all the good it'll do you.

"Why are we turning down Victory Boulevard, Matt?"

"We're leaving your little playmates behind, Maggie," I said crisply. "I don't know what's going on, but we can do without Joe and Varney riding our tail."

"We what?"

"Look, Maggie. We've been to the ball, but it's over. Midnight. Cinderella kicks off the glass slipper. We unmask. Brady has been more than a little dense this week end, but he's coming out of it."

"Matt, I don't understand—"

I said, "I think you do, Maggie. You're in all the way. And you've had quite a part to play. Phony blackjack game, the build-up when Bart Akers' boys picked us up, everything—including your little get-together with Joe back in the drugstore in San Fernando."

She slipped the catch on her handbag. Won't this be cute, I thought, an empty gun in my ribs. I'll laugh in her face. Then she closed the bag. We pulled up to a red light.

"Matt— Please, Matt, let me tell you about it. I—"

The yellow top of a taxi came abreast. A door opened, then slammed shut. Varney jumped on our running board, opened the door, and slid in beside Maggie.

"Don't do anything foolish, Brady." He brought out a service .45 the like of which I'd packed

during the war. He held it on his knees, the business end right where you'd know it would be. He covered it with a handkerchief.

"The light's green, Brady. Just move along with the traffic. You get any more wise ideas and the world will be one truck-driver short." Then he turned to the blonde. "You been talking too much?"

"I haven't said a thing. Not—"

"Then don't. We'll follow Riverside Drive, Brady. Then up Los Feliz. I'll call the turns. Make your stops carefully."

Maggie asked about him coming in with us. He explained that when I gunned out to run for it, he had split with Joe. They'd covered the two main ways into town, him in the cab and Joe in the big car. We didn't talk any more, just Maggie reading a sign now and then, probably because of the habit she'd started. We ended up in Hollywood: Kenmore, just off Franklin. The big black car was parked at the curb as we pulled up.

"Just sit tight, Brady," Varney said quickly. "We'll wait until Joe comes around to your side before you climb down." I didn't argue with the .45; it makes an awful hole. When Joe called up to me, I got out.

A large apartment-house door opened and spilled a shaft of yellow light on the lawn. An older couple started leisurely down the walk toward us.

"I'll get the grips," Joe said.

That left Varney with a hand in his coat pocket. He'd do the honors and escort me up the walk.

We met the older couple halfway. Just two citizens obviously in the chips. He could have been a business man—furniture maybe, or real estate. Or he might have been a minor movie executive. His face was pink and pudgy, and he wore a loud sports shirt decorated in tropical island designs. He was probably pushing sixty.

His wife, if she was that, linked an arm through Maggie's, but a pair of cash-register eyes fastened on the suitcase in Joe's hand. She wasn't the talkative kind. She said then the only words she was to speak all evening long. Her voice was strident and carried at least two houses in each direction.

"Have a nice trip, dear?"

Maggie nodded. "Very."

We were guests. Guests, in case any of the neighbors happened to be listening in or watching us. Oh, yes, we were company—until they got us inside that luxurious living room and closed the door.

"What the hell goes on here," Pudgy barked. "Who's this fellow? Who told you to bring him—"

"Keep your shirt on, Cain," Varney answered. "It wasn't our idea. Brady here drove the truck. He wised up somehow. We had to include him."

I tried for humor. "If I'm in the way, I'll leave."

Cain glared at me, then gave his attention to the suitcase on the thick maroon carpet. Maggie slid the zipper on her bag and tossed the key. I shot a quickie at Varney, but his eyes were not on the money, they were on me. With the full light of the room on the packaged goods, Cain's face softened. He scratched absently at his pink jaw, then lifted a packet of twenties for close examination.

"A clever bit of work," he admitted softly. "Wirth does a first-class job." His wife leaned over and ran loving fingers across the phony wealth before us. When Cain replaced the money, he closed the lid, and turned to me. For several endless seconds his eyes went over me, his face expressionless.

"We'll hold a business conference, Mr.—"

"Brady."

"Yes. Mr. Brady. We'll have to decide what we can pay, Mr. Brady, to insure your silence."

He nodded to his wife and went through a door on the far side of the room. She motioned Maggie and Joe toward the door, then followed them. We waited in silence until they filed back in.

"We've decided we can part with two thousand dollars, Mr. Brady," Cain said. Along with the money you received at the Silver King, that brings you in for almost twenty-five hundred."

"That," I said with conviction, "will buy a lot of quiet, Mr. Cain. So let's put the guns away and—"

"Not so fast. You aren't in until you take the cash, and we can't take any chances until you're definitely in as deep as we are. Once you get the money, any talking you do will be against yourself. You see how it is?" I nodded. "Varney and Joe will get into the truck with you. We're paying in real money, of course, and you can drive them out to the ranch where they'll get it for you. Then you can go on your way."

There wasn't any more to say. They weren't buying my silence with money. Somewhere out along the road they'd cut me into their caper, but not in cash. Half a clip of lead—that would be my payoff. A strict guarantee that Matt Brady wouldn't upset their little apple-cart. I glanced across the room at Maggie Blake, the blonde fluff—the decoy who led me into this. How was she liking it? I caught her eye, and something didn't fit, because she wasn't liking it at all. Panic was there. Panic, but behind it something else, something I couldn't be quite sure of. She opened her little bag; her head snapped up.

"Wait. The note with your address—he's got it." That stopped the house. She reached into her purse again, then started toward me, her steps slow and deliberate, her attention on the purse. "We wouldn't want him to have that paper in his pocket," she said. "It

could lead to trouble. I showed it to him after Varney gave it to me, and—"

Cain was looking at her as she made another forge through the purse. But when she came abreast of Varney, her hand flashed to his gun and pushed the barrel away from me. The purse fell to the floor and then her little automatic pressed against Varney.

"Drop it," she said harshly. "Nobody moves."

There wasn't a sound, not a breath until Varney's gun thudded to the carpet. The blonde was in command, but with a gun that wasn't loaded. Only I knew the bullets were safely in my pocket.

Cain was first to recover. "Maggie! You're out of your head!" he barked. "You can't get away with a highjacking job here! We'll—"

Her voice was steady, her words direct. "The house is already surrounded. I'll shoot if anyone moves. Varney first. You—"

"You're bluffing." Cain's face had turned from pink to a violent red. His eyes snapped; his heavy jaws shook. "Joe and Varney cruised back eight and ten miles to be sure that you weren't being followed. You didn't have our address until Varney gave it to you in San Fernando. That was your last stop. There was no chance to pass it along."

"It has been passed." She was cool now. Cool, and moving almost by habit, like a G.I. who feels fear until H-hour and then the sand is under his feet and it's carry on the old routine come hell or high water. "Every turn," she was saying now. "A small walkie-talkie passed the word. Two years ago you made it. You ran the counterfeit money down here and killed the stooge. But this time the tail was out in front. Out in front, Mr. Cain, directed and kept informed by the walkie-talkie, shifting a street this way and a street that as needed. It was simple."

I caught a look of anxiety on her face. She expected help any second, undoubtedly thinking it should have been here by now. And she looked determined enough to hold out until they came. Fine, except the gun she held was completely useless and the word hadn't been passed over the walkie-talkie since San Fernando. I'd pulled the tube; the set was dead. There just wasn't going to be any help for her.

Tension showed in every face. I glanced at the .45 Varney had been forced to drop. Even as I looked, the corner of my eye picked up the movement across the room of Joe's hand. I dived for the gun, just as Maggie's automatic clicked on an empty chamber. She gasped. Varney piled on me, his hand reaching for the gun, but I'd already closed on it. A gun barked. I squeezed off a pair of fast ones, saw Joe pitch and double up. Before I could turn the automatic on Varney, he'd flopped on the floor,

his arms outstretched, a cry for mercy in his throat. I struggled to my knees and looked around. Cain lay cringing on the floor. His silent wife had disappeared, but I wasn't worried about her. The blonde knelt beside me, the useless automatic in her small hand. Somewhere a window crashed and a woman screamed. Then the glass behind me shattered and a gun poked in from the darkness. The voice was loud and clear, and loaded with authority:

"Hold it! Don't move! This is an arrest!"

There must have been half a dozen of them streaming through the lush apartment. Cain and his wife were in custody of two business-like gents and Varney was shackled to Cain.

I turned to Maggie Blake. "Would it do any good to ask where the hell you fit into this picture? Could I depend on one honest answer—just for a change?"

"Every time, Matt. From now on, every time." Her voice said she wanted me to believe it. The purse lay open on the carpet, a lipstick and compact had spilled out of it. She nodded toward the purse. "Pull out the lining, Matt."

The leather was loose along the top. I worked it away. There was a card, a white card, and pretty big. It was folded down the middle. I've never seen one, but I can read. The words TREASURY DEPARTMENT were there, and SECRET SERVICE. Some signatures of people I'd never heard of, but I recognized the picture.

"Must be another gag," I said.

"No gags, Matt. It's level from here on in."

A tall man was coming our way. His face was drawn and lean, and more than a little careworn—like a colonel whose regiment has just come through a nasty day's work. He stopped in front of us.

"What went wrong, Maggie?"

"My gun," she said ruefully. "I was doing all right, but when I pulled the trigger there was nothing—"

Her voice stopped as I held my hand over hers, opened my fingers and allowed the bullets to fall into her palm.

"I didn't mean your gun," the tall man said. "Why didn't you keep tipping us off on streets? We didn't hear a thing after San Fernando—had to get to a phone and put in an all-cars call on the L. A. police radio. If they hadn't spotted the truck we'd never have found you. Damn set must have—"

I had something for him, too. I fumbled in my pocket and tossed the little tube across to him. He turned it over and over in his bony hand. "How long have you had this?" he asked finally.

"Since Bishop. That's where I first noticed the car following us." I grinned. "The rest I found out in San Fernando while the girl frittered away her time watching

the back wheels on my—" I moved just in time to avoid a sharp kick.

The tall boy in the gray hat spoke again. "Over a year we've worked on this one, Brady. Wirth's a cute one in more ways than making plates. He can plan, too, and he's strictly an opportunist. Never lays it out way in advance so you can dig up a stoolie and set a trap. Not Wirth. He waits for something new and different to turn up, wheels into gear and ships the money out before you can get organized. Like you. He probably never thought about using you until—"

"He didn't," I cut in. "He'd already ordered the stuff taken off my truck, then changed his mind and kept me around town."

"Probably. We planted Maggie on him, had her wiggle into the setup, but Wirth trusted no one. The last time he shipped something out he killed the patsy who did the carrying. We'll fry him for it if we can prove it. Either way, they've taken him into custody up north tonight. I radioed right after we lost you in San Fernando. They'll round up Akers too."

I thought about them knocking off the last one who'd made the trip and Maggie knowing it and still going on. I thought about her cracking up for those few minutes just out of San Fernando. I understood now. My hand found hers.

Tall Boy put a set of bony knuckles on her shoulder. "You've been under quite a strain, young lady!" he said and smiled. "We've called for a couple of rooms for you at the Biltmore, a little space where you can rest up and sort of collect yourself for a few days while we get the prosecution end of this thing rolling. I'll have one of the boys drive you over."

Her fingers tightened on mine a time or two. She caught my eye and gave me that slow half-wink.

"Come to think of it," I said, "I'll be going that way myself."

"Thanks, boss," she told the tall fellow quickly. "I'll just let Matt run me over. I'm getting so I like trucks. They're so—so—"

Then he smiled and waved an arm as he turned away.

We stepped out into the cool evening and walked toward my rig. A shaft of moonlight caught us and cast a shadow on the walk.

One shadow. We were close enough to make it do for the two of us.



I hope to introduce in these pages each issue a brand-new writer—one who never before has been printed. This story I chose from a dozen manuscripts by new writers because of its unusualness. I trust you will find it as intriguing as I did.



six and two make nine

by Henry Peterson

He stood in the center of the thatched hut and surveyed the scene about him. The soft light of late afternoon drifted through a window-like aperture in another room and reflected on the dust particles that floated in a state of suspended animation. The door to another room was closed. He walked over to open it, his boots kicking up little clouds of dust as he went. The door creaked as it was opened. The oppressive silence was not broken by his footsteps. He wondered how long it had been since this place had heard a sound.

Sunlight streamed through another crude aperture in the thatch and in the distance the sun rested gently atop the main-mast of his frigate. He turned and started back into the room and thought how curious it was that his boots seemed to make no audible noise on the floor. There was something foreboding about this place. He wished now that the others who were waiting for him in the dory had accompanied him. "Too near night," they had said. A superstitious pack. He strode across to the first room he had observed and stopped in his tracks midway. On two cots lay two human skeletons covered only by a blanket of dust.

They lay as if their owners had died asleep. The room was barren except for a dust-covered hatchet on the floor. He picked it up and looked at it—much the same as any other hatchet. He walked back into the main room and lit his torch that he might see better in the darkening corners. There was a table on which rested a book. He picked it up and brushed off the



cover. It was a fine book, with a handsome leather cover and the inscription: *Diary 1754.* He read the notation on the first page written in a neat feminine hand: "To our beloved son, Lt. Harry Crane, H.M.S."

He read the first entry . . .

March 3

After spending six weeks in sick bay due to injuries the ship's surgeon considered serious, I am informed by that able man that I may return to full duty and that

I will undoubtedly be cited for my actions during our engagement with a pirate ship off the bay of Tunis. This former news is most welcome as, except for an occasional headache, I feel completely fit and ready to be about the task of helping to repair the injuries (some of serious consequence) sustained by our ship during the conflict.

March 5

We must make a port. A storm is brewing and I doubt very seriously if H.R.M.S. Corinthian is capable of riding out very heavy seas.

March 22

Thank God. I feel that is the only appropriate beginning to this notation. In His infinite mercy He has seen fit to save nine of us from the mercy of the sea—myself, Lt. Benton, Boswain Sykes, five seamen and, more praise to God, Surgeon Rowan.

We do not know what place this is yet but it seems to be fertile and prolific in nuts, wild fruit and game. If the Almighty has seen fit, it is possible that we are not too far off the trading lanes for our signal fires to be seen, which we keep going both day and night.

We have begun construction on a hut to house both officers and men as there is safety in numbers and we do not know yet but that there are wild beasts about.

March 29

We have finished our abode and have a spring almost in our back yard. Lt. Benton, as senior officer, is in command and is going about the task of organization and assignment most efficiently. Each day there are four major duties that are assigned: one man is constantly tending our signal fire on the beach, a party of three is assigned to forage for fuel for the signal fire (green branches for the day fire and dry for the night), another party runs our traps we have set for small game, and Surgeon Rowan takes a man with him daily into the interior of our little island in search of herbs and bark that might be used for medicinal purposes. I say our *little* island affectionately, rather than with a knowledge of its size, for it has been good to us. I am going to propose that we build a boat capable of navigating about the island for I feel that if there are wild savages on this island we would be better off to espy them from the sea than to run head on into them in the jungle.

April 30

Yesterday we finished our boat. We arose at sunup today and Boswain Sykes, Seamen Kelly, Crawford and myself put to sea to be about exploring the size of our island and to see if there were any signs of human life on the other side. We kept a quarter of a mile

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to sea in case we might be sighted by savages armed with bows. We saw no sign of any other humans. I believe we are the sole inhabitants. We have just now returned at dusk and I would say that our island is approximately two miles in diameter and almost circular in shape.

I

May 3

Leaving Seamen Rollins and Burke to tend the signal fires, and fortified by the reports from our navigation around the isle, we have organized a party of seven armed with knives and cutlasses for further reconnoitering of the island.

I would to God we could have salvaged a few firearms but in their lieu we have had to construct some crude bows and arrows to hunt with. Some of the men have become quite proficient in their use and I myself practice when I have time as skillful manipulation might some day prove expedient. If only my father and mother could see their pride and joy now—what a regal picture would confront them; hatless, hair and beard down to collar, ragamuffin uniform, shiny cutless at my side and bow and arrows in my hand. The caption might read, "Lieutenant Harry Crane of His Majesty's Service stalking a squirrel."

May 7

Tragedy has struck. Seaman Foley, on a medicinal expedition with Surgeon Rowan, was bitten by a poisonous snake this morning. Luckily they were not far from our hut. We heard his cry and helped him back to the hut where Surgeon Rowan bled him. It is evening now and his fever seems to have gone down a bit. Lt. Benton offered Thanks at supper for the refuge of this isle and its abundance and also for the speedy recovery of Seaman Foley.

May 8

Foley continues in a delirium. I seemed to have contracted a slight fever but have found a plant that seems to help.

May 9

Foley's fever has gone down enough that he does not have to be attended at night and I feel better than at anytime since we landed.

May 10

We buried Foley today about twenty yards to the rear of the house. The poor fellow must have lapsed into a delirium and killed himself. Surgeon Rowan found him this morning in his cot with his throat slit from ear to ear. The surgeon's scalpel lay on the floor in a pool of blood. Needless to say the good man feels extremely upset over the incident. He feels that if he had had a strong-box in which to lock his instruments this could not have happened.

May 12

We found Surgeon Rowan this morning hanging from a tree by his own belt over the grave of Seaman Foley. Surgeon Rowan was a conscientious man, but can extremes of conscience carry a person that far? I am beginning to doubt.

As I looked around at the faces surrounding the grave this morning I saw the same doubt. There is a possibility that none of us has dared let enter into our minds at the death of Seaman Foley. The possibility that we are stranded on an island with a murderer. We will have to face that possibility now. I intend to speak with Lt. Benton after supper about the matter.

May 13

At my suggestion an inquest was held. Lt. Benton questioned all of us thoroughly, and singly. Of course we had none of the personnel records of any of the seamen or officers but so far as our own personal knowledge of each other went we could think of nothing disreputable or incriminatory. Thus, the inquest was a failure, except to bring out into the open the fear that had been lying dormant in every mind; and that of course served no avail except to frighten the men, possibly needlessly. After all, it could have been suicide both times.

I wish I hadn't suggested the inquest now. Lt. Benton warned me that it might serve no purpose other than to stir up distrust needlessly, but I persisted, I believe, through my own fear.

May 14

There can be no doubt of it now; we are marooned on an island with a homicidal maniac. Seaman Burke reported finding Boswain Sykes with his throat cut when relieving him for duty at the signal fire.

I don't know what Lt. Benton intends to do but I do know that his command will be untenable if he does not act immediately. Each of us is looking at the other as if he expects the other to turn into a murdering monster any minute. No one will turn his back, not even for an instant.

And there are those grim reminders in back of the hut. After we bury Sykes there will be three of the wooden crosses.

May 15

Lt. Benton has held an inquest. Seaman Burke found the boswain at three o'clock in the morning. We all went down to the fire after being aroused by Burke and found him not long dead. His throat was cut but none of the blood had coagulated; in fact, some still stood in little beads on a pile of driftwood he lay on. Lt. Benton and myself being rather light sleepers could vouch that neither one of us had left the room during the night.

Kelly swore that he could not sleep that night and that he and Seaman Rollins had played a makeshift game of checkers until Burke came back with the news. Rollins verified this. That left only one person who could have killed Boswain Sykes.

The men were for killing Burke on the spot. But Lt. Benton had another idea. There was only circumstantial proof that he had killed the boswain and no proof that he had anything to do with the deaths of the other two. So he proposed that we rig a sail on our boat, store it with provisions for two weeks and set Burke adrift in it. With the warning that if he headed back to the island and was found he would be executed on the spot. However, if he made it to friendly territory or was picked up by a friendly ship and informed them of our plight, he, the Lieutenant, would see that he got a fair trial and recommend clemency if outright pardon could not be obtained. This judgment appealed to everyone. So Burke was set adrift this afternoon doubtlessly thankful to escape alive although maintaining his innocence all the while. I believe that more than one were hoping he would make it. It seems as though Lt. Benton has handled this situation with an admirable degree of capability.

June 4

Almost three weeks now since Burke was set to sea and the tension seems to have passed. We are all faring well now except for slight attacks of fever. I seem to have recurrences quite frequently now associated with headaches. I have sent Seamen Crawford and Rollins in search of the plant that helps alleviate fever. I sent with them as a sample the last bit I had for my own private use.

June 7

Seamen Rollins and Crawford have not yet returned. If they are not back in another day we will have to organize a search. At least that is what Lt. Benton has said. That should be interesting; three men searching for two—who will be discovered, we or they?

My fever seems to have gone down but my head feels as if it shall surely split.

June 9

We started and finished our search for Crawford and Rollins yesterday. We found them by a burnt-out campfire, their throats cut. Buzzards, companions of our island I had not been aware of, acted as guides.

All the way back to the hut we tried to walk abreast through the sometimes dense underbrush. It seemed obvious that one of the three was a homicidal maniac. None of us said a word throughout the return. Finally, when we entered the hut in silence, Lt. Ben-

ton turned to Kelly and me, and said, "Let's stop looking at each other as if one of us is a maniac. It seems as though I made a mistake when I didn't have Burke executed. He has returned to the island intent on destroying us. Our only course is to hunt him down and destroy him."

It seemed like sound thinking and made Kelly and me feel a little ashamed of ourselves.

June 10

We set out at daybreak this morning after what I am sure was a sleepless night for all three. We decided to scout along the shores of the island to see where Burke had landed. About a mile and a half up the beach we found the boat and the bones of Seaman Burke. It does not take long for buzzards to strip a man of his flesh but there was a three weeks' growth of barnacles along the waterline of the anchored boat. Apparently he had anchored just off shore in order to keep a rendezvous with one of us. He would be safe from roaming snakes, animals or from mosquitoes out there. But he had not been safe from the murderer.

June 11

We all three sleep, or should I say lie, in the same room now. Last night was one of the most fantastic I have ever spent. My cot is next to the window, the moon to my back. About three feet away is Benton's, and on the other side Kelly's. I was lying on my back, the moon streaming across my cot and into the room, listening, for what I do not know, when I became aware of the absence of Benton's usually heavy breathing. I was afraid to roll over to look at him, afraid that if he saw me looking at him he would think I was the murderer. I struggled with myself, but I had to look. I realized that the moon would be to my back and that he would not be able to see my eyes. I rolled over on my side, facing his cot. Benton was lying on his side plainly visible in the moonlight, his eyes wide open, watching me, breathing very softly.

June 13

We go everywhere together. Never is one of us out of the sight of the other two. Nor has one of us slept a wink in the last three nights. Nay, sleep is the one thing we fear . . . or at least two of us fear. For with sleep the murderer, we know, will do his handiwork.

June 15

We brought Burke's remains into rest yesterday, the sixth cross in the row. Benton said a prayer and I could not help wondering if it were not the master hypocrisy. Kelly stared insanely. He could surely not last much longer. When the prayer was finished Benton

looked at me and said, "I know who the killer is." Neither Kelly nor I spoke. He turned to Kelly, "It has to be you, Kelly." Kelly leaned forward on the shovel with which he had been digging, his eyes bulging. He was truly the picture of madness.

"It was you, Kelly, who said that no one had left your room the night Boswain Sykes was murdered. You lied and threatened Rollins so he would verify your story." Kelly cracked; he lunged at the lieutenant with his shovel, screaming, "Liar, Murderer!" He missed but the lieutenant did not. As Kelly lunged wildly by he plunged his cutless through Kelly's throat. The momentum ripped the sword from Benton's hand. Kelly lay quite still on the ground, a fast-forming pool of blood about his head, his eyes open and rolled back in their sockets, the sword still impaled in his throat, crimson the length of the blade, only the handle reflecting the sun.

I stood rooted to the spot. Benton walked over, put his foot on Kelly's shoulder and pulled his blade loose. I must have been gaping rather insanely for Benton looked up at me and said, "Come on Crane, snap out of it. It's been a nightmare but we've got our killer now."

I nodded feebly. How would I ever know, unless Benton . . . ? But you did not argue with a man whom you thought might be mad, especially when he has a bloody cutless in his hand.

June 18

Benton has been looking at me rather oddly these past two days. He keeps telling me that this has been too much for me, that I must get some rest, sleep. But I'm too smart for him. I go into the woods and doze some during the day pretending I have been fishing. I shan't go to sleep in the same room as that man, ever. Last night he made heavy breathing sighs like he was asleep but I saw his eyes in the moonlight, staring.

June 19

I am the only man alive on this island. I knew it had to be that way. Yesterday my headache returned so severely that I went to my cot and fainted. It was noon when I passed out and about midnight when I awoke to a refreshing breeze. My head was bursting but I could still think clearly. Benton was lying on his cot asleep, this time with his eyes closed. I reached under the mattress and removed the surgeon's scalpel. I moved as quietly as the night over to his bed, plunged the scalpel in under his left ear and across to the right.

Of course I had to do it; he was the real murderer, wasn't he? But it was strange how familiar it felt when I plunged the scalpel in and it did relieve my headache.

June 30

My headaches persist; I don't think I can stand them much longer. I have fainted repeatedly since the death of Benton. I am now the only human being on the island, just me. If there were only someone else here . . .

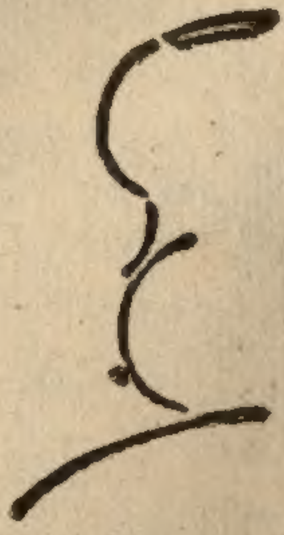
My scalpel is in my hand almost constantly; the idea has possessed me that the only way to relieve my headaches is to plunge the scalpel under my left ear and draw across to the right. If there were only someone else on the island. But there are only eight others. Seven under seven crosses in back, and Benton who still remains asleep in his cot. I am going to lie down in mine now and try to sleep also. Perhaps I will never get up, the fever is in my eyes now and I can hardly see how to write.

There were no more entries. He laid down the diary. His torch was burning low. He must hurry back to his mates, waiting and certainly vexed at his dalliance, to return to the dory and the frigate ship. But he could not resist the temptation. He strode around to the back of the house where a little path led to a clearing.

As he advanced the light from his torch began to pick up elongated shadows in the clearing. They shortened and the first disappeared as he stood over it. It was the first of a row of crosses he could make out in his flickering light. He began to count: three, four, five, six. A chill ran down his spine. There was no seventh. He thought he heard a footstep behind him; he whirled, horrified —too late.

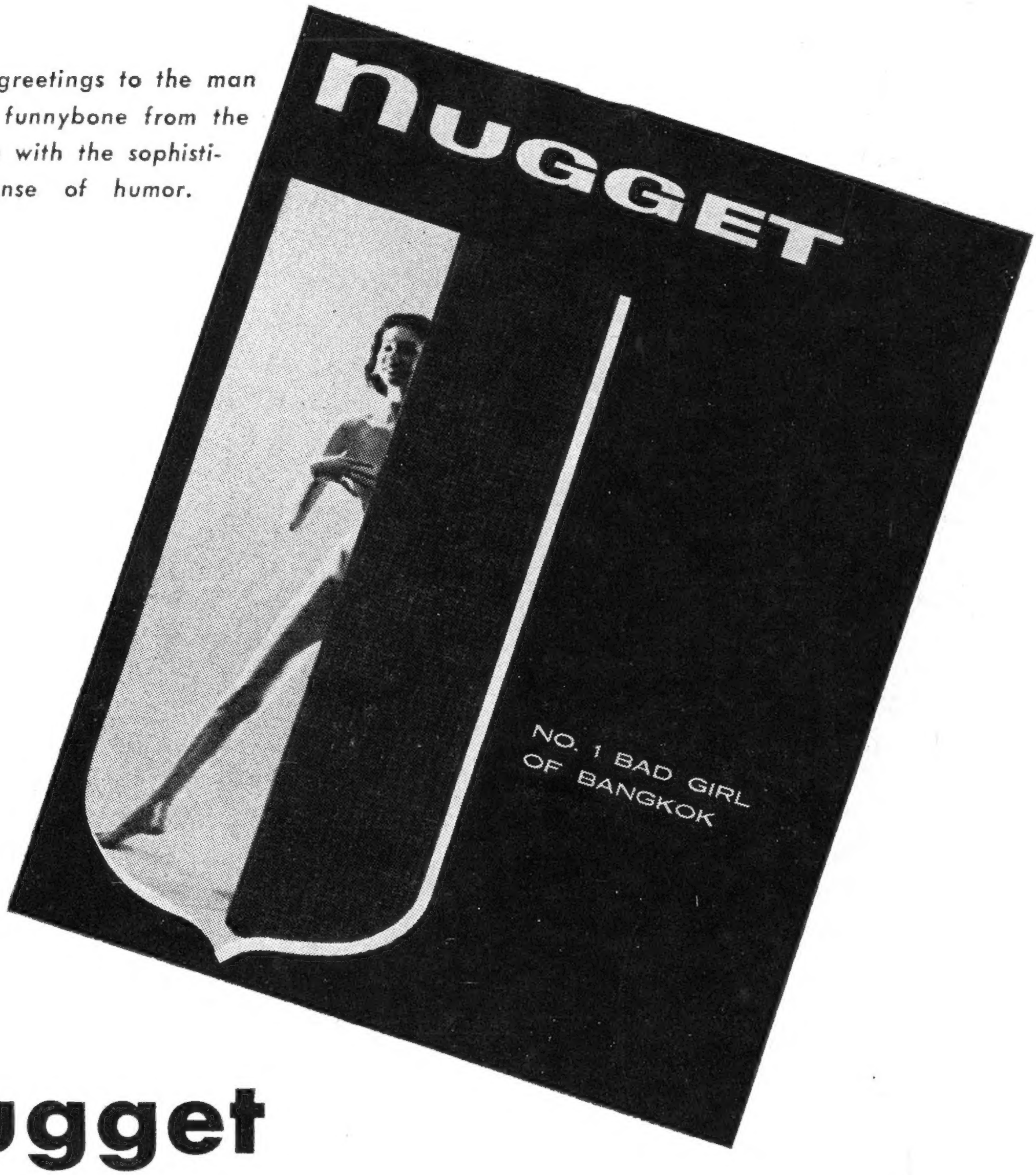


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